BREAKING SOD ON THE PRAIRIES

Taber

•In Pioneer Life Series•

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Pioneer Life Series
Edited by Howard R. Driggs

BREAKING SOD ON THE PRAIRIES

A Story of Early Days in Dakota

by
Clarence W. Taber

Illustrated by
Edward J. Boecher

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Other volumes in the Pioneer Life Series have told of the pathfinder and the hunter — the men who pushed the frontier westward. This new member of the series tells of the settler, the man no less hardy and courageous, who subdued the new lands that his forerunners had spied out. It is true that the settler escaped many of the dangers of the wilderness which the trail blazer had encountered. But dangers and difficulties enough confronted him. In the northern prairie country particularly there was a bitter struggle between man and his environment. There the settler had not only to endure the arduous toil that always faces the man who would break new soil; often when the results of his labor were swept away by storm or blasted by hail or withered by drought, he must begin to build up again from nothing. For their patient courage, steadfast determination, and unconquerable spirit the sod-house pioneers claim our respect and admiration. The small part of their story told in this book will serve to remind us that the achievements of the settler, as well as the exploits of the scout and the hunter, are part of our pioneer history

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A WORD OF INTRODUCTION

Breaking Sod on the Prairies takes us into the land of the Dakotas during the earlier days when the settlers, following in the wake of the soldiers, first planted their homes on those wind-swept plains. The characters of the story, though given fictitious names, were real persons; and the events related are true in all of their essential details. In a word, this little volume presents a realistic picture of the pioneering of our northern prairie lands.

This pioneering episode came rather recently in the history of our country. It was not until the late seventies that the Indian troubles were cleared away and the great reservations in Dakota Territory were largely thrown open for settlement. Then came the rush of land-hungry people for the great stretches of rich, virgin soil. In this wave of home-seekers and speculators who swept in, rich and poor, educated and ignorant, practical and unpractical folk found themselves suddenly thrown together and confronted with new problems connected with subduing the soil and making settlements. It was a case of the survival of the fittest, and the fittest did survive, as the story plainly shows. The unpractical, the visionary, the weak, gradually gave way under the stern demands of pioneer life, leaving the hardier and clearer-minded to carry on the work of carving out the great states of today.

The author of the book has drawn upon his own rich experiences out in the prairie country during those beginning days for the materials he has woven into this story. As a boy he lived through the tense struggle that made the vast open lands habitable. He even played the part at one time of an actual sod-house builder,

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when he set up such a house for himself and lived in it one winter alone, devoting his time to earnest study, while the snows swept around him.

To see the author now in his well-equipped office in the heart of Chicago, directing an important part of the affairs of a great business concern, one finds it difficult to recognize in him a "sod-house pioneer." But sometimes in the quiet of his own fireside, when he grows reminiscent, this part of his life story will come out — as it did one night when I was a visitor in his pleasant home. It was then that I urged that the story of pioneer days he held in clear memory be written down, to give to us all a closer view of the settlers' conquest of the northern prairies.

Out of the suggestion has come this little volume, which not only tells a convincing story, but also makes more vivid for us an important phase of our American history. The book gives, too, many realistic lessons in the nature and geography of the vast region where America's great wheat belt has since been developed.

Howard R. Driggs

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

The scene of this story is a part of our country that only a comparatively few years ago was represented upon the maps as an unsettled region, a territory that had not yet been carved into states. It is hard to realize that events so near could constitute a part of the epic enacted by those who first took up the challenge of the Western plains, enduring untold hardships to transform the wild prairies into the productive and habitable states of today.

Yet, although it was not much more than a generation ago that the events herein described took place, the background of the story is the struggle of pioneers fighting to subdue a vast stretch of new country, the same struggle that took place first along the Atlantic seaboard, later in the Middle West, and still later in the Far West. Even the menace of the Indian hung over the Dakota settlers of our narrative, although the Indian tribes had been removed to reservations. But the winds that blew across the Dakota prairies were keener than any the New England settlers had felt; the bitter cold of the winters and the blasting heat of the summers were something unknown to the farmers who settled the Ohio country; the California pioneers experienced nothing like the blizzards that at times made the Dakota country seem unconquerable; and nowhere else, except in the Southwest, was there the same cruel lack of water.

The history of pioneer life in all parts of the country has usually recorded the experiences of grown men and women. If the truth were known, it would be found that a very important part also was played by the boys and girls of America. In this book we have a true story of one boy who, in common with thousands of other young Americans, had his share in the development of our country; but, if any dedication of it is desirable, it should be to the memory of Henry Bacon and all the other pioneer school teachers of America.

CLARENCE W. TABER

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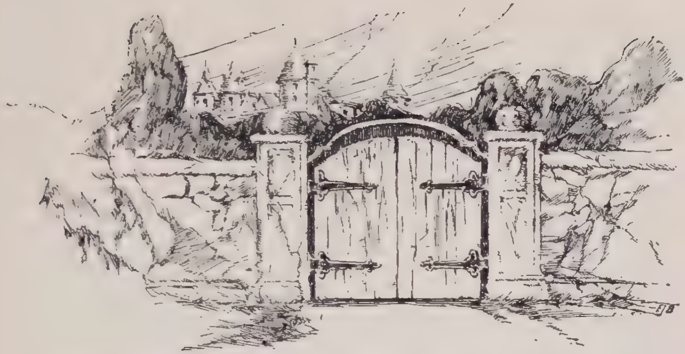


'The old Castle was a gloomy place, with its many nooks and forbidding corners."

CHAPTER ONE

LIFE AT THE CASTLE

I REALIZED as we rode home from the cemetery that I never should see my father again. The thud, thud, thud of the horses' hoofs upon the bridge echoed in my consciousness, "*Never, never again!*"

"Poor little Donald!" my mother sighed between her sobs, as she held me on her knee and patted my head; but by this time "poor little Donald" was more interested in the passing panorama of trees, gardens, houses, and city streets than in the tragedy of death through which the family was just then passing.

Home we rode — mother, Aunt Mary, sister Irene, brother William, and I, Donald Deen — to a new order of life, without my father. The family scarcely had begun to become accustomed to it before news came of my grandfather's death and of a wonderful house in another city which he had left us for our future home.

Grandfather was reputed wealthy, as wealth was measured in those days. He was said to be as peculiar as was the house in which he lived alone for years before his death. To my mother he left an ample income, besides several pieces of real estate, including the "Castle," as our new home came to be called. By the terms of his will, however, every penny of mother's income was to cease should she marry again.

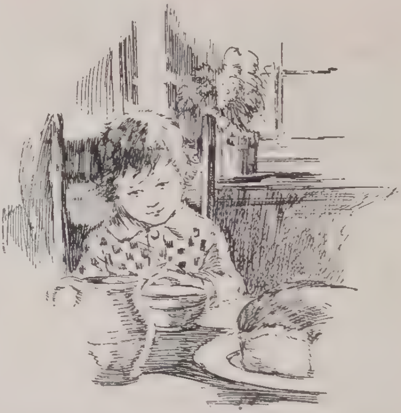
Soon after my father's death we moved into the Castle — "the house of mystery," some called it. The Castle was a brownstone mansion built in the form of an octagon, with each of its eight sides covered by climbing roses, honeysuckle, and purple wistaria. It was set in the midst of a small park, consisting of a spacious lawn, well-kept gardens, and arbors which contained a variety of fruit trees as well as a wealth of native timber. The old structure with its beautiful grounds was entirely surrounded and almost hidden from the street by an ugly stone wall too high to be scaled without assistance. This forbidding stone wall lent an air of mystery to the place which impressed itself upon every member of the family, as well as upon the passersby, who often stopped to wonder what was hidden behind the walls or within the strange brown building that never failed to excite curiosity.

Here for ten years we lived; and despite the gloom that pervaded the household, we children were comparatively happy; we should have been completely so, had it not been for the depression that had taken possession of mother. One of the strongest of my earlier recollections of my mother is a remembrance of the sound of her sobs as I passed her door. I was distressed and puzzled at the importunity of her prayers, for she seemed always to be praying.

Mother had had many sorrows. Only three of her sixteen children had been spared to her and, now that both father and grandfather had gone, she was submerged in grief. Perhaps it was this preoccupation that made mother much of a stranger to me. Her face seemed made for smiles, and yet I remember it as chiseled with the lines of sorrow and self-imposed penance. An old daguerreotype still in my possession shows her as an exceptionally beautiful woman; patrician she was in face and stature — every inch a woman of dignity and character.

Not until the days preceding mother's death did I learn of her ancestry from her own lips. When Holland's power was to be reckoned with in New Amsterdam, the reigning queen had issued letters-patent to a certain plot of ground in the new country to her lady-in-waiting. This land later became famous as a part of Trinity parish; and here, still later, Trinity Church was erected. Deserting court and retinue, this fair lady-in-waiting took up her residence in New Amsterdam and became one of my far-removed great-grandmothers.

Although I was very young when my father died, I was early taught the most intimate facts about his life, ambitions, and accomplishments. His portrait, painted by his own hand, for he had been an artist, hung upon the wall of the great hall of the Castle. This quaint picture of him shows a cleanly-shaven man whose youth is partly disguised by long black hair smoothly brushed over the sides of his head, almost covering his ears. A Prince Albert coat and a black string tie of the period add to his somber appearance. I vainly search the oval face, the gracefully arched brows, and the generous mouth for resemblance of me; yet I know that in me lives the very soul of this man — a soul that has continued its search for the unattainable. I came to worship him and to think proudly of him as having been a man of great achievement.



"Not a bite could we eat until family prayers had been said."

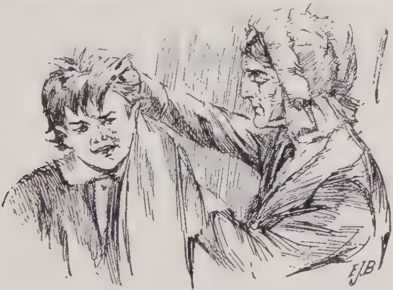
Before I was born, Aunt Mary had come to live with us. She was the Martha of the household, busy long after all the other members of the family had fallen asleep. She had experienced a tragedy against which our own family troubles paled; yet with all her sorrows, grief had left no lines in her face. Because she was always cheerful, always ready to wait on every one, we children naturally learned to love her. We came to depend more and more upon her, and less upon mother, who was so much concerned with our spiritual welfare that she could find little time to attend to our physical needs.

No monastery observed the hours of religious ceremonies more faithfully than the Castle. At daybreak, prayer ascended from the bedside of each member of the family. As soon as he was able, each child was obliged to read a chapter in the Bible before coming down to breakfast. Not a bite were we allowed to eat until family prayers were over. First came the reading of a chapter from the Bible by mother, then the saying of a verse by each member of the family, the collective singing of a hymn, and last a long prayer by mother.

The saying of verses was one task we children particularly disliked. It took too much of our play time to hunt up the short verses in the Bible; and then, having found them, we were in constant fear that one of the others of us might happen to have learned the same verse. My brother, who was constantly in difficulty with Aunt Mary because of his failure to keep his face clean, insisted after every altercation on repeating at family prayers, "and the priest shall pronounce him clean." Despite this assurance, he was not delivered from the wash rag. Indeed, Aunt Mary's vigilant eyes often discovered during prayers a dirty spot behind brother William's ears. After prayers, grace was said at the table, and then we were allowed to fill our stomachs. At the noon meal, we escaped with grace only, unless we chanced to have ministerial guests, which was a frequent occurrence; at the evening meal, the morning service was repeated.

Saturday afternoon always was spent in a round of baths and pre-Sabbath duties. The shoes of the family were polished by my brother and me, and clean linen was laid out for the next day. All newspapers, story books, and other light literature were put safely out of sight until Monday morning. Even the scissors were hidden, for fear we might profane the Sabbath by cutting out pictures.

This, however, was Aunt Mary's busiest time of the



"He was not delivered from the wash rag."

week, for all that was to be eaten on Sunday, must be cooked on Saturday. No fire was allowed in the cook-stove on Sunday. Church in the morning, Sunday school after a cold luncheon, young people's service early in the evening, and church again at night,—this was the order of the day for young and old alike. Sometimes a sunrise prayer meeting was added.

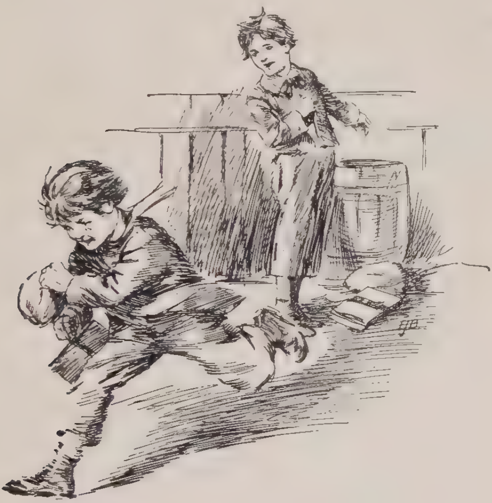
I was a well-grown lad before being allowed to attend school, and then I was led there by my mother. The other boys I avoided as much as possible, slipping home by myself through back streets and alleys in order to escape their unwelcome attention. The bully of the class lay in wait for me, but week after week I succeeded in outwitting him, until one night, as I was hurrying home, we ran into each other. His eyes lit up with cruel joy as he realized that at last he had cornered me.

"Well, 'fraidy cat! Now I've got you!" he sneered as his fist swung out in a well-directed blow that landed on my nose. Cornered I was! With his blow, however, all fear left me and it was only a minute before I learned who was the real coward. As soon as he could break away from the frenzied embrace in which I was holding him, he fled down the street.

Picking up my books and adjusting my cuffs, I returned with head erect to the Castle, little the worse for the encounter, but with a new realization that there was a world outside the Castle walls, waiting perhaps for my appearance in it.

Little I knew how suddenly the opportunity to battle with the outside world was to come to me. It came in a most unusual way, brought about through mother's religious activities.

Not satisfied with her usual church duties and the religious atmosphere of the home, mother suddenly took to attending camp meetings. The results astounded the family. I well remember her coming home one night, after several weeks of these meetings, with every button on her coat replaced by pins, and with every ring missing from her fingers. The rings had gone into the collection box, while the buttons, being considered too worldly, had been shorn from her coat as an added sacrifice to mistaken piety. Never again did she wear personal adornment of any kind.



"It was only a minute before I learned who was the real coward."

About this time, mother brought home from one of these religious meetings a man who was destined to turn the current of our lives into new and strange channels.

CHAPTER TWO

A STEPFATHER OF THE STORY-BOOK KIND

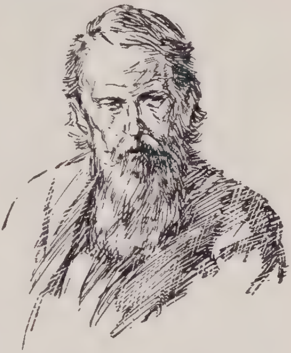
ALEXANDER FRAYDEN was fully six feet tall. His broad shoulders carried a mammoth head, bushy with sandy hair that almost touched his coat collar. With his rosy cheeks, his gray-blue eyes, and the long, flowing red beard that covered his broad chest, the Scotch-Irish giant was a conspicuous figure.

Well-dressed, punctilious in the smallest matters of conduct, he at once made a decided impression upon the family. It soon became apparent that he was seeking to curry favor with each of us; but my brother and sister, being older, were not to be won over so easily as I. The more he attempted to cultivate them, the more they repelled his advances, although at times even they could not resist his efforts to please.

From the day of his first call at the Castle, Alexander Frayden made himself at home, and it was not long before he seemed to be one of the family. To have a man about the place, especially one who took pains to consider our childish wants, was a great thing. Was there a broken sleigh or doll, the magic of his fingers made it whole again; while the stories of fairies and goblins and strange lands which he told revealed a new world for our imaginations to revel in.

This strange newcomer soon became the life of every social gathering in our home. His conversation was punctuated by quaint witticisms, made the more interesting by a slight Irish brogue. Whether the talk turned to tales of travel or developed into religious or philosophical discussion, he was equally self-possessed in holding his own with the most learned of our guests.

Alexander Frayden was a graduate of Dublin University, a lay preacher, by occupation at times a house-painter, a carpenter, a mechanic, and again a traveling salesman; with these activities he combined a number of avocations. Indeed, he had even partly completed a medical training, which he later put to good use in the family. But despite his education, his shrewdness, and his native ability, he never had been a success at anything he had undertaken.


Alexander Frayden.

Apparently, he was as religiously inclined as my mother. This must have been the interest that drew them together. As soon as his footing in the family had become established, he assumed full charge of the evening services. We all enjoyed his reading of the Scriptures, for he put meaning into texts that before had been meaningless to us. And how he would sing! With head thrown back, eyes closed, and mouth opened, he rolled out the hymns. But his prayers were endless, and many a time on my knees did I regret that he had been introduced into our home, for he found more things to tell the Lord than did any other man to whom I ever listened.

One night his lengthy prayers were suddenly cut short in a startling way. Perhaps because the presiding elder and one or two other church dignitaries were present, my stepfather had grown unusually eloquent; but just as he was rounding out one of his most polished periods, "wrestling with the Lord," as he would have called it — imploring the Deity to "give us, Oh, give thy servants" —

our pet parrot suddenly electrified us with a raucous cry, as in a sacrilegious voice it screamed out, "*Amen!*"

The devout elders suddenly were on their feet. Aunt Mary quickly covered the cage with her apron and carried the parrot out of the room; as we again dropped to our knees, we could still hear the bird's cry growing gradually fainter and fainter with its "*Amen! Amen! Amen!*" The next day the parrot and cage disappeared, and despite our questioning we never learned the fate of poor Polly.

With Alexander Frayden's coming, the devil which my prospective stepfather painted contributed not a little to my fears. In the dark, after I had gone to bed, I would cover my head with the bed clothes, lest I see this personal devil, with horns, tail, and pitchfork, spring out from some corner of the room. In the daytime, when this hideous fear vanished and our childish hearts were about to expand in anticipation of the day's pleasures, Alexander Frayden would call our attention to the crude picture of a staring eye, done in colored worsted, which hung over the dining-room door.

He would ask, pointing to the eye, "Do you know what that is?"

"The eye of God," we had been taught to say.

"And how does the motto read?"

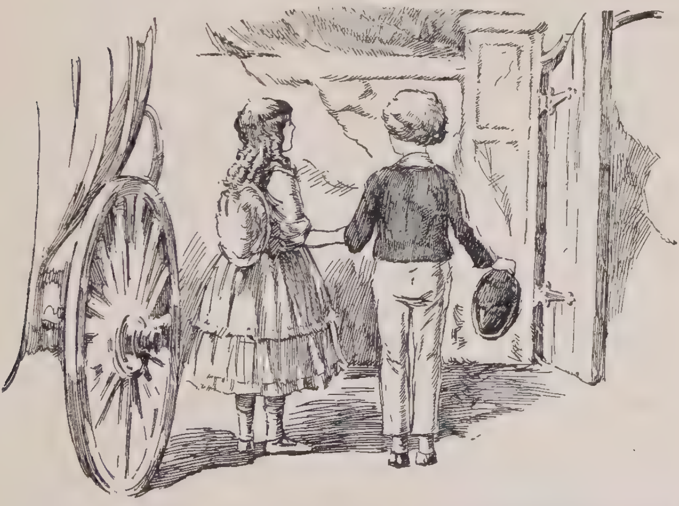
"'Thou, God, seest me,'" we glibly replied.

"What an awful, terrible thought!" he then would say. "To think that wherever you are, whatever you are doing, God sees you! When you are playing, God is looking at you. When you are doing things that are naughty, even though you know no one else can see you, remember God sees you! You can hide under the bed, or pull the clothes over your head, or shut yourself in a dark closet, but you can't get away from the eye of God!"

In time, under the spell of this man's bewitching presence and outward religious zeal, mother defied my grandfather's will and ignored his wishes by marrying again. A few weeks after the wedding, a coach drew up to the Castle, and as the gardener hastened to unbolt the gates for the entrance of the carriage, I ran with my brother and sister to see who might be our visitors.

My newly-acquired stepfather was the first to alight. From the coach he assisted my mother, who was followed by a red-headed, freckled-faced boy of about my own age, hand in hand with a girl whose long red curls proclaimed her to be his sister. Mother awkwardly tried to introduce us; but as they had journeyed far, the necessity for rest and refreshment gave us the pause we needed to recover our mental equilibrium.

When the door of the Castle had closed upon them,



"A red-headed boy, hand in hand with a girl whose long red curls proclaimed her his sister."

brother William and sister Irene silently led me away by the hand, all of us too dumbfounded to express the mixed emotions we felt. Through a thicket of blackberry bushes in one corner of the park we had made a passageway, and now, following this secret path, we entered a cave-like opening entirely surrounded and covered by the thorny bushes. Here no one ever had found us. In fact, we often had discussed whether or not the "Eye" could penetrate the gloom of our cave, for not even the rays of the sun reached us, so dense was the covering.

"Is he going to keep 'em here?" was my question.

"Of course, silly!" answered William.

"Make our Castle into an orphan asylum!" indignantly exclaimed Irene.

We knew that our stepfather had been a widower, but no one had told us of the children, and I doubt if my mother had spoken of them even to Aunt Mary.

"Much he loves mother! All he wants is a home for his kids and mother's money for himself," was William's terse remark.

This point of view struck me with much force. All afternoon long we discussed the situation, refusing to be comforted and determining to make the "red-headed kids" wish they never had come to the Castle. Frequently our arguments were stilled, when we heard the voice of Aunt Mary calling us, or when mother came out to hunt for us.

The gardener, who was aiding in the search, declared we could not have slipped out of the gate; but as we remained undiscovered in our hiding place, it was concluded that we must have escaped to the street.

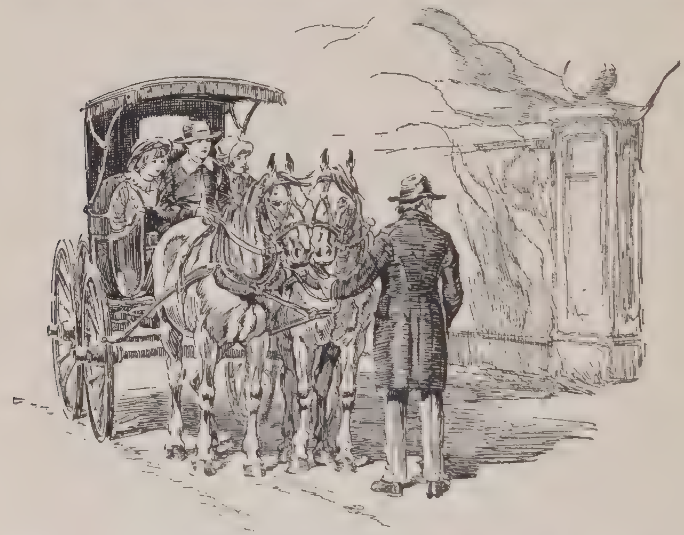
As twilight gave place to starlight, we became nervous and apprehensive. Night approached rapidly. We were cold and tired and hungry. The fear of grandfather's ghost, the terror of my stepfather's "devil," and the remembrance that even here the "Eye of God" might reach us, finally drove us to surrender. With stealthy tread we crept into the house, up to our rooms, supperless, to bed. We must have been discovered, but we were not disturbed; and the next morning nothing was said about our escapade.

After morning prayers, at which the red-headed little strangers were quite at home, mother took us aside and told us of our new stepbrother and sister; how they had no mother and for many years had had to live in an orphans' home. It was not difficult to work upon our sympathies; our plans for making their lives a burden at once gave way before the desire to have them feel at home. Soon we were sharing with them our toys and books, gradually growing as fond of the little freckled strangers as we were of each other. For the years that we remained together, I can recall no quarrel or bitter word between us.

After the advent of the Fraydens things began to happen. At first, it was quiet suggestions to my mother that the house needed new furnishings; or that the gardens needed a more modern arrangement. These hints always were acted upon by my mother, so it was no wonder that in a short time Alexander Frayden ceased to make them and assumed full authority.

First, the gardener was discharged; then, the manservant who had been with my own father for many years. Trees were dug up, chopped down, or moved, as suited my stepfather's fancy, while my mother's money was used in various ways to make the place modern and hideous.

About this time, the newspapers were full of the possibilities of the "Golden West." A fortune was beckoning those willing to turn the sod of the unbroken prairies where the foot of white man scarcely had trod. The Federal Government was fostering the public craze for land by offering as much as four hundred and eighty acres of land at a minimum of expense to every settler who was a citizen or who would declare his intention to become one.



"The Castle gates closed behind our little band of pioneers."

Attracted by the Government's offer, my stepfather journeyed to the "Great American Desert." His letters to my mother were glowing with the wonderful possibilities for those willing to "take a claim" in this new country. He sent us gifts of buffalo robes and fur caps, Indian arrows and dried prairie flowers, gifts which stimulated our imagination as nothing else would have done.

The generous income left to my mother by her father had ceased with her marriage to Alexander Frayden. Neither did it continue to her children; otherwise, this story might never have been written. As we had lived rather unpretentiously, despite the stateliness of the Castle and its grounds, mother must have accumulated some considerable capital in the way of ready cash. Perhaps, realizing that this money would not last indefinitely, my stepfather had the idea of investing it in some way by which we all might be saved from want later in life. At any rate, it soon became clear from his letters that he had determined upon moving us to the plains of Dakota Territory, a plan that was causing our elders much uneasiness.

In due time, he returned, only to confirm the fears of mother and Aunt Mary by announcing his intention of going West. All of the family were to go on with him, excepting mother, sister Irene, and me. It would be necessary for mother to find a purchaser for the Castle and for other property, before we could join them.

And so, one autumn day, we tearfully bade goodby to Aunt Mary, brother William, and the others. As the Castle gates closed behind our little band of pioneers, the rest of us settled down for the winter; — my mother in fear of the future, my sister glad to be free of the presence of our stepfather, and I, lost in dreams of the coming adventure.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

THE last winter of our life at the Castle dragged slowly on to spring. We heard little from the West, but that little served to whet my appetite for more about our prospective home. I took to reading Cooper and as many books as I could find dealing with the plains country. What Cooper did not supply, and what information I could not find in the tales of Custer's last fight, I found in *Deadwood Dick*, *The Laramie Kid*, and similar dime novels which brother William had smuggled into the house.

All the while, I was chafing at the delay incident to closing up mother's affairs, which kept us away from the promised land of adventure. At last a purchaser was found for the Castle, but spring had come and gone before we finally closed the gates to the old home on a day in early July.

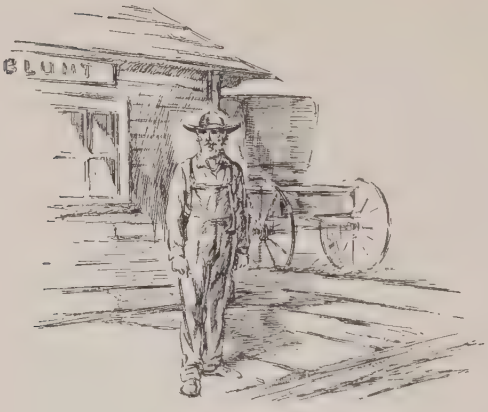
Boyish regrets at leaving the Castle were swept aside by the impatient anticipation of the unknown that awaited us. Four days and four nights we journeyed from the Atlantic seaboard. On the last day of the trip we rode through a gently rolling prairie country. As far as the eye could reach, nothing was to be seen but the waving grass of the unbroken prairies, an occasional sod house, or numerous white patches dotting the plains — the last vestiges of the decaying bones of the vanished buffalo.

The train came to a stop at what looked like a collection of bath-houses such as one sees at a watering resort. One street laid out at right angles with the little station was flanked on both sides by one-story houses and stores, each with a square front projecting above the building like a signboard and each painted in a different color, giving the place the atmosphere of a circus or carnival.

As we alighted from the train, we at once recognized my stepfather; but the neat and correct attire of the eastern gentleman had been displaced by a pair of blue denim overalls, a grey flannel shirt with soft collar open at the throat, and an immense straw hat crowning his bushy hair. The small surface of his face not encroached upon by his beard was as red as his whiskers. Somehow, he did not appear to be the same man who had beguiled us with the magic of his speech and the elegance of his attire. He greeted my mother hastily, with a kiss on the cheek, gave me a nod of recognition, and urged us to hurry, as it would be necessary to speed up if we were to make the journey allotted us for the day.

"Jake, the hired man, drove down the ox-team and I drove the horse and buggy," he said. "You children

On the Atlantic seaboard.



"We at once recognized my stepfather."

ride with your mother in the buggy and Jake and I will follow with a load of supplies."

Not one word about mother's health or how we had stood the trip! No evidence of solicitude, no questions as to our immediate needs!

"But — but I never drove a horse in my life!" mother exclaimed.

"Can't learn any younger! Any one can drive that mare! Donald can drive, if you are afraid," he replied shortly.

"But we don't know the way," ventured mother.

"Ha! Ha!" roared my stepfather, "That is a joke! Just follow the road and you will get there all right. Keep a-going north for sixty miles and you will be home. The horse knows the way even in the dark."

My mother's anxiety was evident, but she made no further protest.

"Wait here," my stepfather said to my sister and me. "Mother and I have to settle with the freight agent."

As they entered the little red station, Irene turned upon me with a spirit that astounded me.

"What did William tell you? Didn't I say the same thing? Just as soon as he gets us out here and all mother's property sold and her money in his hands, you'll see what kind of a stepfather you've got!"

"But he's your stepfather as much as he is mine."

"I won't own him," Irene replied. "Just see how shabbily he treated mother. He doesn't love her."

Having finished his business, my stepfather soon bundled us into the buggy. Placing the reins in my hands, he showed me how to steer the horse and how to stop and start as I pleased. Elated at the prospect of driving, I quickly forgot all my doubts and fears.

"We will follow with the oxen, but it will be at least a day later before we can reach home," he said.

And so, having been directed on the one and only road that led toward the north, we waved him a goodby and began our journey into the unknown.

Even to my young mind, it seemed a cruel and selfish thing to do, urging mother, with two children, to drive for sixty miles across an uninhabited and unknown prairie; but evidently my mother feared his wrath, for she made no further objection.

Behind the little village, which we learned was named Blunt, massive hills rose one over the other. The road seemed endless, as we wended our way upward to the summit of what we afterward learned was called a "butte," one of a series of hills that, following the Missouri River, spread eastward until merged into the prairies.

When we reached the top, we found ourselves facing a country almost as flat as a table, which extended north and east as far as we could see. We had no trouble in following the road, as it was the only mark of man or beast in evidence. Not a house, not a barn was in sight; not a furrow of plowed land. Mile after mile we drove, and hour after hour!

Often, we would stop and get out of the buggy to rest and to pick prairie flowers; blossoms that we never before had seen. But what interested us most were the many buffalo skeletons, laid out, as it were, to bleach like white sheets upon the green prairies, mute evidence of an almost extinct form of life. Some of these skeletons were almost intact; the teeth in the jaws were unloosened, while great mats of coarse hair still clung to the skulls between the horns.

At one stop in particular, the feeling that perhaps the foot of white man never had trodden these virgin plains took possession of us and we felt that we were on holy ground. The prairie grass, swaying in the summer wind, gave the wide expanse of country the semblance of a vast ocean, the waves of which never were at rest. I trembled with fear at the immensity of it all and wondered what this strange country held for us. I seemed in danger of losing all sense of personal identity, merged, as it were, into the eternal vastness of space.

"'Though I flee to the uttermost parts of the earth, yea, Thou art there,'" my mother quoted.

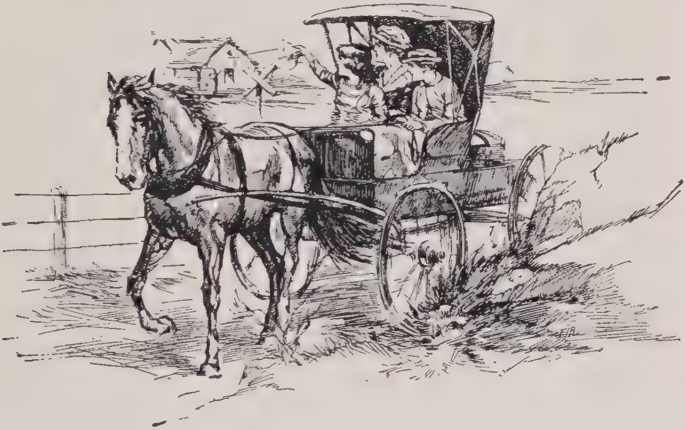
"The 'Eye' again," I whispered to my sister, who stood with me a short distance from my mother. "Just what he said; we never can get away from the eye of God; but I thought maybe out here —"

"Come, children, we must hasten if we are to reach our destination before night," mother interrupted. Once more we climbed into the buggy and proceeded on our journey.

"Suppose we should run into a band of Indians!" sister suddenly exclaimed.

"Your stepfather says there are no Indians nearer than the Reservation, which is fully twenty miles to the west," mother answered.

It was another hour before we came in sight of a structure that proved to be a sod house. This we learned was called the "halfway house," because it was midway between the town we had just left and the little hamlet to the north, called Center Town, in which we expected to pass the night.



"We turned into the road from the halfway house."

At the halfway house, we stopped long enough to have a bite to eat and to feed and water the horse. The keeper of the place, a strange, unkempt woman with bare feet, was the only person in sight. We were thankful enough for the short rest and the refreshment furnished us.

The woman handed us a map showing the townships in the country through which we were to pass, pointing out our destination. She explained to us that each township was six miles square and was divided into thirty-six sections of six hundred and forty acres each. Each section represented a square mile. Like the squares on a checkerboard, the Federal Government had laid out these sections, dividing them from each other by roads called section lines. She also explained how we could know just where we might be in relation to the next township.

"If yer watch th' side of the road, y'll cum to four square holes an' in th' center between 'em y'll see the dirt from th' holes piled in a little mound. Th' four holes means yer on a section line where another section line crosses it. It means yer just a mile either way from another section line.

"Now, halfway ter th' next milestone, y'll cum to two holes with a pile of dirt 'tween 'em. This means yer half a mile from th' nearest section line. This is th' dividin' line 'tween two quarter sections. If it wuzn't fur this, th' settlers wouldn't know where their land wuz.

"Halfway 'tween th' milestone an' th' half-mile stone, y'll come to one hole and this marks th' quarter mile.

"Now, if y'll notice, y'll see on th' mound of dirt 'tween th' four holes a stone or a little board and on it y'll see one or two or three marks, straight up an' down, that's been chiselled there. If it's one mark, it means yer one mile from th' township line in th' direction that th' sign faces. If it's two marks, yer two miles away, an' if it's three, yer three miles from th' township line."

I took much pleasure, for the rest of the journey, in locating these surveyor's landmarks, often getting out of the buggy to verify the woman's statements, comparing them with the map she gave us.

"Be keerful of ther Okobojy!" were the woman's last words as we turned into the road. We did not know who or what the Okobojy was, but the strange word caused us much speculation.

"It's an Indian!" I suggested.

"Your fath — stepfather," my mother faltered, "says the Indians are harmless."

"But the woman warned us to be careful," my sister rejoined.

"'I shall not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day,'" quoted my mother.

"That's all right for the daytime, but it doesn't say nothing 'bout the arrow that flieth by night," I ventured.

"Don't be so literal, Donald. It means the same thing," chided my mother.

"But what about this Oko-okobogy?" Irene persisted.

As she spoke, the ground suddenly seemed to fall beneath the horse's hoofs. A sharp declivity that merged into a torrent of water confronted us.

The road stopped at the water's edge, but we could see where it began again on the other side. Before we could stop the horse, we were plunging through water that reached nearly to the bed of the buggy. Too much frightened to act, we did the best thing we could have done in letting the horse have its head. Soon we were safely climbing the opposite bank and, as we stopped at the top of the summit, we began to suspect that this stream was the Okobojy. An unusually wet spring, and the melting of the previous winter's heavy snow, had combined with the summer rains to change a dry ravine into a dangerous torrent.

All the afternoon we rode without meeting a solitary traveller or the sign of a habitation. The sun set in a blaze of gold that bathed the green prairies in wonderful colors. A flock of prairie chickens, frightened by our approach, broke cover and took to the air. A meadow-lark gave throat in a burst of melody. The forbidding mystery of the plains vanished and we were transported to a veritable fairy land.

Gradually the western sky faded into violets and purples and the heavens blazed forth with a million stars that shot their shafts of light to earth in a brilliancy we never before had witnessed. Again the scene changed, and mother reminded us of the plains of Bethlehem, of which we had read.

We now noticed, far along the eastern horizon, millions of twinkling lights — a vast torchlight procession that extended for miles along the eastern fringe of the prairies. For an hour we speculated upon this strange phenomenon, but not until we reached Center Town did we learn that we had seen a prairie fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

TWO STRANGE CHARACTERS

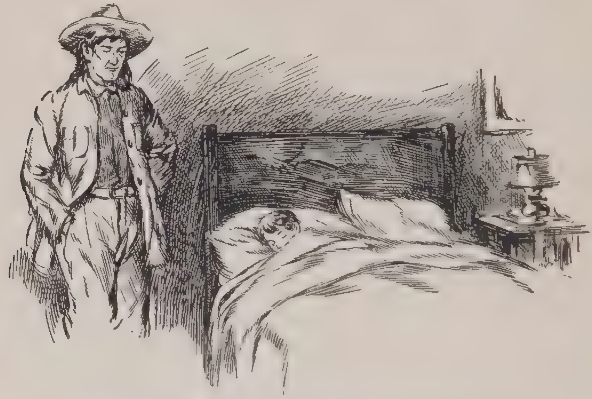
Center Town consisted of a square box-like structure called The Buffalo House, a little one-story frame store, and a few tents. We were tired enough even to sleep out on the prairies, so we did not object to the meager accommodations which the hotel afforded.

The hotel, in fact, was as primitive as the town. The walls of the rooms consisted of brown building-paper fastened to the upright scantlings which measured off the little cubicles occupied by the guests. A rickety bed, a washstand with its bowl and pitcher, and one chair, constituted the furniture. A smoky kerosene lamp on the washstand added just enough illumination to reveal the dinginess of the room.

Homesickness for my comfortable bedroom in the Castle almost overcame me, and I threw myself upon the bed in dejection, trying to stifle my sobs in the hay-filled pillow. A man in an adjoining room began to snore. Never had I heard such a noise! In alarm I sprang to my feet. Who was he? Perhaps he might be a brigand! Nothing separated us but the thin paper partition. "Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror by night," flashed through my mind, as I knelt down and looked under the bed.

I tried to lock the flimsy door, but the catch was out of order and a key evidently did not exist. Satisfied that I was alone in the room, I said my prayers, hastily undressed, blew out the light, and clambered into bed, covering my head.

A heavy step and a knock at the door frightened me into an upright posture, but I had no voice to answer the summons or courage to get out of bed and open the door. In fact, I did not have time to do so before I saw the white doorknob turn. Slowly the door opened, but as it did so, I quietly slid beneath the covers and feigned sleep.



"I quietly slid beneath the covers and feigned sleep."

"Seems like I'm to be yer bedfellow," sounded a voice that filled the little room.

I dared not dispute the man's word, and yet, in my little world, I knew of no convention that allowed for such a situation. My tongue was tied from fright, I held my breath, as from between the fringes of my eyelashes I tried to make out what manner of man it was who was to be my unwelcome bedfellow.

Having struck a match, he tried to light the lamp, and I saw the figure of a very tall and gaunt man, whose lean, hawk-like face stood out in shadowy profile, accentuated by the long, black hair that fell nearly to his shoulders.

One eye appeared to be gone, its empty socket giving him a fearsome aspect. A jagged, red streak under the other eye marked what must have been a serious wound. Throwing his big, broad hat upon the floor, he removed a leather coat and unclasped a belt, to which was attached a huge holster. From the holster he drew a large pistol, which he thrust under the pillow next to me.

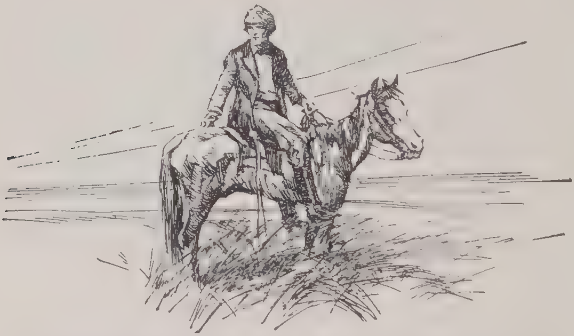
How I got through that night I do not know. I turned my face to the wall, moving as close to the edge of the bed as possible. I was afraid that at any moment a knife might pierce my back, never thinking to ask myself why this stranger should desire my life. As soon as he crept between the unsheeted blankets, however, he fell into a profound sleep, from which I feared he might suddenly awaken and perhaps make an end of me. I had read of just such a man in one of Beadle's dime novels.

I dared not move for fear of awakening him. I recited to myself all the Bible texts I had learned that might fit the situation, but somehow I could not remember that any of the Old Testament heroes had ever been confronted with quite the same problem.

As the first glimmer of dawn showed upon the window pane, stealthily I climbed out of the bed and as silently hurried into my clothes. Then I tiptoed downstairs and out into the deserted street of the little hamlet. Thoroughly chilled by the early morning air, I was most miserable. Being afraid to prowl about the town, I sat upon the steps of the hotel and watched the reddening of the eastern sky.

Fortunately, it had been determined that we were to get a very early start. Not more than an hour had passed before mother and Irene appeared with the landlady, who had promised to get us something to eat. By this time I was growing ashamed of myself and unwilling to say anything of my strange bedfellow. However, the stranger did not appear while we were at breakfast and before noon I had forgotten all about him.

Thirty miles was the distance allotted for the day. The country was very similar to that which we had crossed the previous day; gently rolling prairie, sometimes ascending and forming small hills, and again falling, with a suddenness sometimes quite disconcerting, into narrow and deep ravines. Again, we would come out upon a tableland that stretched almost as flat as a floor, as far as the eye could see. Occasionally we would enter what was called a lake bed. These lake beds were nearly all dry, but covered with a grass unlike that of the prairies; later, the settlers used it for hay. Undoubtedly, in post-glacial days they had been mighty inland seas, for some of them were miles in dimension.



"A strange figure on a pony, coming out of the west."

Toward evening of the second day, we were startled by the sight of a strange figure on a pony coming out of the west and travelling in our direction.

"Oh, an Indian! An Indian!" I shouted excitedly.

Mother and sister had nothing to say this time; for in the gathering twilight we could not make out the figure we had discovered. Undoubtedly, it was a man, but of the most grotesque figure we had ever seen.

A tall, peaked cap surmounted his head. His legs were so long that they swept the prairie grass and almost touched the sod. His long, lank arms hung at his sides. The animal he rode was a real Indian pony, almost as diminutive as a Shetland.

"Drive slowly, Donald," mother cautioned, "and perhaps he will not notice us and will pass on ahead."

As the man reached the road, instead of riding on ahead, he threw a leg over the pony and stood upon the prairie, a veritable giant of a man in height, but thin as the proverbial bean-pole. Casting the reins of the bridle over the pony's head, he threw his cap to the ground and, with arms upraised to the sky, drank in the air.

Suddenly sinking upon his knees, he raised his head and, with upstretched arms, began an invocation that we could but overhear. Grasping my arm, mother quietly stopped the horse and there, a few feet from the strange kneeling figure, we waited for him to finish his prayer.

"O, Holy Ghost, come down upon this virgin land and people it with Thy children!" we heard him implore.

By this time our presence must have become apparent to him, for he arose quickly from his knees and approached unabashed. Sweeping his cap before him and inclining his head in a most extraordinary bow, he addressed mother.

"Pardon me, madam, but are you not Sister Frayden?" he asked.

"Why, why-er, how did you know my name?" she stammered.

"I know Brother Frayden, right well. He told me you were comin' as I met him on his way to Blunt. It was easy to guess who you were, for wimmin are as rare as fresh fruit in these parts."

"We did not intend to intrude or to disturb your devotions," my mother said apologetically.

"No one can intrude between me and the Lord, Sister. Seein' as how I was goin' your way, 'spose I ride on ahead and guide you?" he suggested.

"I am sure that would be very kind of you," mother answered, "but would it not take you out of your way, Mister —?"

"Jones, ma'am, 'Holy Ghost' Jones, they call me in these parts," he replied to my mother's unasked question. "You see, ma'am, I'm an evangelist. Of course, I respect each Person in the Godhead equally, but the Holy Ghost always seems more personal to me and nearer to the children of men, and though I makes no discrimination and shows no partiality, natcherly, I may preach a leetle more about the third Person in the Trinity, than I does about the other two, an' so folks got to callin' me 'Holy Ghost' Jones."

My sister and I were about to laugh, but mother nudged us to be quiet. Catching his pony, the giant scarecrow — for that was what he appeared to me — swung one leg over the animal and seemed to give it a start by shoving on the ground with both feet.

"Follow me, Sister Frayden!" he called, as the pony broke into a lope. Such was our introduction to "Holy Ghost" Jones, a character to be reckoned with in "these parts," as he called the section of this vast immensity which was to be our home.

CHAPTER FIVE

FRAYDEN'S FOLLY

Once more the shadows fell upon the plain, a welcome relief from the rays of the hot July sun. Twilight gave place to night. The tired horse, with head down, stumbled on. A few rods ahead rode the scarecrow on his diminutive pony. Irene was fast asleep and my own head nodded with every turn of the wheels.

Soon the moon came over the eastern horizon, flooding the prairies and tipping every blade of grass with a silvery sheen and lighting up the road as far as the eye could reach. Sister at once awoke, and our spirits instantly revived as we witnessed the wonderful spectacle, for the rarefied atmosphere gave a splendor to the moon's rays that never had been apparent in our faraway eastern home. Even "Brother Jones," as mother called him, suddenly responded to the scene. Throwing his head back and straightening himself in the saddle, he burst into song. Slowly the words of the hymn floated back to us:

"Holy Spirit, Truth Divine,
Shine upon this soul of mine;
Word of God, and inward Light,
Wake my spirit, clear my sight."

"Surely a man of God," my mother murmured.

Presently we heard the barking of a dog and, looking ahead, we discovered a light that came from a high knoll before us. Gradually we recognized the outlines of a tall house.

"Do you suppose it is our place, mother?" I asked; but before she could reply, the evangelist called back to us as he halted his pony and waited for us to catch up with him, "Behold, Frayden's Folly!"

"'Frayden's Folly?'" indignantly questioned my mother.

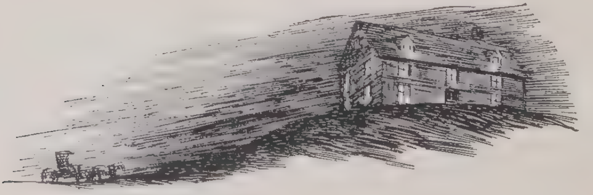
"No offense, ma'am. You know there are not many settlers in these parts. Most of 'em are poor and all of 'em live in sod houses, and when your man bought lumber at thirty-five dollars a thousand and hauled it sixty miles and built that big house you see up on that hill, well, the neighbors thought it was foolish. You see, ma'am, it was not only the cost and the long haul, but he had to haul hard coal from the railroad to heat it and that cost thirteen dollars a ton at the station. You kin heat a sod house with a hay-burner, but a big, unplastered house like that, without any clapboards on the outside, — well, ma'am, it did seem sort of foolish, don't you know, an' so some of the settlers nicknamed the place 'Frayden's Folly.'"

"Just like him," Irene whispered to me, "always wanting to make a show!"

"Is it a mile more to — to the farm?" mother asked, uncertain what to call the new home our prospective neighbors had seemed to ridicule.

"Bless you, ma'am, it's a good five mile," the preacher replied. "Distances are deceivin' in this country."

Worn out and discouraged, we settled down to the



Frayden's Folly.

last few miles of our tiresome journey, but we now knew that the long road did have an end.

Brother William, stepbrother James, and stepsister Jennie, all hurried out to meet us, followed by Aunt Mary. There were so many questions to ask and answer that for a time we forgot all about "Holy Ghost" Jones. William, however, invited him in; but, as he was on his way to another settler's home, a mile or two to the east, he thanked us for the invitation, promised to come to see us soon, and rode on.

Despite the showy appearance of the house from the outside, the inside of it gave little promise of home comfort. Dining room, kitchen, and one bedroom downstairs were divided from each other by brown building-paper nailed on each side of upright scantlings. A slanting ladder furnished the stairway to the upper story, and there we found several bedrooms partitioned off from each other in the same way as the rooms below. Loosely laid flooring, with cracks between the boards, permitted the light from below to shine into the rooms above, while we could look through the cracks and see what was going on below.

After eating the good supper that awaited us, we were glad to go to bed. All night long I was dreaming of the endless prairies and of the great sky sprinkled with billions of stars, while from the white bones over which we had ridden the buffalo suddenly sprang to life again, stampeding over the plains in countless herds. Then, rising out of a blazing prairie fire, I saw the queer figure of Holy Ghost Jones, which soon gave place to that of my stepfather.

Next morning we were up very early. Daylight revealed Frayden's Folly to us as a mere two-and-a-half story shell. The big barn-like structure, that seemed so imposing in the shadows of the previous night, was made of studding, covered on the outside with tar-paper and weather boards; no siding on the outside, and no lath or plaster on the inside. Daylight could be seen from the inside through the nail holes. William told us that the wind would blow the snow through these holes during the winter, forming little piles of it upon the bedroom floors.

The house was situated upon the only eminence in this section of the country. It stood at the head of a beautiful valley, overlooking miles and miles of unbroken prairie rolling out in all directions.

The farm had four hundred and eighty acres, or three quarter-sections. Each quarter was called, in common parlance, a "claim." These three claims comprised a "homestead," a "preëmption" and a "tree claim."

At breakfast we listened eagerly to stories of how the family had passed the previous winter in this new country.

"Blizzards!" exclaimed my stepbrother James. "Why, sometimes you can't see your hand before your face at noon, and with the sun shining, too!"

"And forty below zero for days at a time!" added William.

"And we had to melt snow for water to drink and cook with. Water for the stock had to be carried in barrels from the nearest well, eight miles away," James said.

"You're trying to scare us. Is it true, Aunt Mary?" I asked, anxiously.

"Yes, every word of it!" she replied. "Oh, why did I ever come to this terrible country!"

Many, many times we were to hear this question from Aunt Mary, for she invariably would ask it every time anything went wrong.

After breakfast we went out to see the barn, the cattle, and the machinery. The barn was a long sod structure built in the form of an L, one side about sixty feet long, and the other a hundred feet or more. It was built in a natural depression on the prairie, two of its sides being formed by an excavation in a small hill. The roof consisted of poles, covered several feet thick with straw that had matted down with the snow and rains of the winter and spring.

Little as we knew of such things, we could see that our stepfather had been making free with mother's money. The blooded horses, shipped from Minnesota, accompanied by experienced men who were still in our employ; a corral near by, full of fine stock waiting to be turned out to range; strange-looking machinery, which stood unprotected about the barnyard — all told a story of expenditure that must have been appalling to the frugal settlers. The marks of the melting snows and the dripping rains across the newly painted machinery and in the rust-encrusted metal parts, gave evidence of the improvidence of my stepfather.

"There isn't another settler in the country that has such machinery," James boasted.

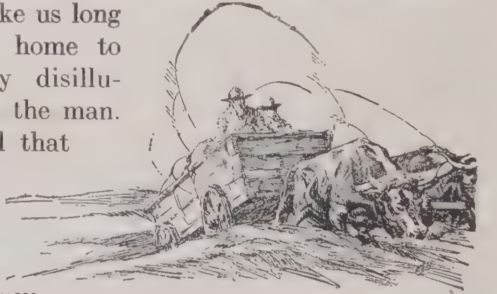
"That's a mower, and that's a hayrake," explained William, pointing out the several pieces of machinery to me. "And that's the binder. It's not set up yet. It cuts the grain and ties it in bundles. And that's a walking plow and here's a sulky plow, and this is the gang plow. This is the drag, or harrow, and here is a pulverizer, and this is a seeder, and here's a roller to pack down the ground after it has been seeded."

My mind was awhirl with the strange names and the purposes for which all this machinery was intended. The cattle, with their long horns and vicious actions, frightened me. I wondered if I should be expected to care for them, or if I ever should learn to use such complicated machinery.

Everything that was needed for successful farm operations had been provided, in sharp contrast to the farms of the neighbors, many of whom had been unable to purchase much more than a walking-plow. As a consequence, there was hardly a wheel on the place that was not in constant demand by borrowing settlers. They never paid for the use of the machinery they borrowed, and, if returned in a damaged condition, it generally was repaired at our expense.

It was the second day after we reached Frayden's Folly that my stepfather arrived with Jake, the hired man. They had had trouble at the Okobojo; the heavily laden wagon, full of lumber, coal, and provisions, had stuck in the mud of the creek and they had lost half a day in trying to extricate it.

Neither sister Irene nor I dared to question brother William about our stepfather. William, in fact, seemed to avoid mentioning his name. Indeed, it was with much misgiving that we all contemplated his return to Frayden's Folly. Words were not able to express the tension we felt as we recognized him coming across the prairies. Neither did it take us long after his return home to become entirely disillusioned regarding the man. We soon learned that my stepfather blamed Jake for the mishap that had overtaken them at the



"We recognized him coming across the prairies."

Okobojo; but according to Jake's story, it was clearly evident that my stepfather had no one to blame for the accident but himself. All during the rest of the journey his anger had smouldered against Jake and it continued to manifest itself for many days after their arrival home, finally resulting in a display of temper that was truly alarming.

In addition to being short-tempered, we soon found that he was as stubborn as the balky horse that had been palmed off on him by an unscrupulous trader.

The animal in question was a finely bred carriage-horse that never had been hitched in team, to a wagon, or to a piece of machinery. The trader had not mentioned this fact; but when my stepfather discovered it and found that the animal would balk unless used as a buggy horse, nothing would satisfy him but to break the mare in for farm work.

With this purpose in view, he commanded my brother to harness the mare with another horse and hitch them to a hayrack; but on being given the signal to start, the animal refused to go. Brushing my brother aside, my stepfather jumped into the hayrack and slashed the mare with a buggy whip until his arm was tired. Mother and Aunt Mary ran out of the house, imploring him to stop, but this only angered him the more. Pulling back, the balky mare almost sat upon her haunches; but, maddened by the sting of the whip, she suddenly lurched forward, dragging the other horse along with her. In a second the team was off, plunging blindly down the road. Soon it became evident that one of the reins had caught under the tongue of the hayrack and that my stepfather had lost control of the team.

My mother stood silent, and white of face. Aunt Mary, wringing her hands, rushed up and down the yard, crying and shouting, "They'll be killed! They'll be killed! Oh, why did I ever come to this terrible country?"

I could see William hanging on to the side of the hayrack. As my stepfather naturally was pulling more upon the free rein than upon the one entangled about the end of the wagon tongue, the team soon was going round and round in a circle. Suddenly it made a sharp turn; the hayrack tipped, and over the side went my stepfather into a plowed field.

As we ran to his aid, I noticed William crawling out upon the wagon tongue, holding to the backs of the horses and calming them as best he could by talking to them. Loosening the offending rein, he made his way back to the hayrack and in a few moments had the team under control.

My stepfather had hurt nothing worse than his dignity, but to him that was as bad as a broken arm. Brushing the dirt from his clothes, he returned to the house, and my brother was left to unhitch the now quieted team. Not another word was said about the affair that day.

The following day, however, he determined to break the refractory horse, and this time he had it hitched up to a mower. No sooner did he try to start the animal than it balked again, throwing itself upon the tongue of the machine and snapping it in two.

Alexander Frayden sprang to the ground and lashed the poor brute until we interfered; but by this time his fury knew no bounds. Turning upon my brother, he threatened to thrash him with the whip if he persisted in his interference. Mother and Aunt Mary were much excited, and timid little Aunt Mary did not hesitate to call my stepfather a brute. Never had we heard a cross word from her lips, and now to see this self-effacing little woman bearding my giant stepfather, amazed us all. Whether it was his own astonishment at her daring that caused him to cease beating the animal, I do not know. At any rate, he left the prostrate horse and went into the house without a word.

The men were in great need of the mower, as it was haying time; but the results of my stepfather's obstinacy now made it necessary to take the tongue, or pole, of the mower to Blunt, sixty miles distant, to have it repaired; or, if that were impossible, to buy a new one. This meant almost a week's loss of time; a loss ill-afforded at this season of the year.

The time soon came when Alexander Frayden no longer refrained from showing his irritability with my mother as well as with all the other members of the family. Frequently, in my explorations about the farm, I would discover mother ostensibly picking wild roses and other prairie flowers, but I knew these excursions were made to hide her tears and grief from the rest of the family.

My mother's disappointment in my stepfather must have been very keenly felt; but never was there outward manifestation of her feelings, and never once did I hear her reproach him. Once or twice, as I was wandering through the corn fields, I heard her voice in an agony of prayer. Greatly disturbed, I hurried from the field, with an added feeling of resentment in my heart against the man who was the cause of her suffering.

Although I stood in mortal terror of the man, I wished that I had the courage to resent the attempt to browbeat us. Then there would sweep over me the influence of my religious training. "A soft answer turneth away wrath," and "If thy brother offend thee," and the old passage about turning the other cheek, would flash through my mind and I would seek to placate my stepfather by jumping to obey his every command, or by trying to anticipate his wants. If such conduct had any effect upon him, it was not apparent so far as his treatment of the family was concerned; but I imagined that he felt more kindly disposed toward me than he did toward my brother, — or toward his own son, for that matter.

Alexander Frayden may have been a jack of all trades, but farming, which is more than a trade, proved too much for him; not that he lacked zeal, but rather practical judgment. Quick to plunge into all sorts of experiments, he as quickly found himself in all kinds of difficulties.

Once a week, one of us went on horseback to the nearest post office, called Pembroke, about five or six miles south of Frayden's Folly. Our sack of mail was certain to contain a goodly lot of farm papers. My stepfather's favorite journal was a paper published for eastern farmers and clearly unsuited to the needs of the prairie settlers. His reliance upon this weekly soon brought him into difficulties. After morning prayers, he would spend an hour reading the farm journals before he would order the buggy hitched up. He would then drive around to the nearest neighbors in order to get their advice regarding the planting or harvesting of the various crops. Yet never was he known to follow their advice; after having secured all the information he could, he proceeded to evolve a method of his own.

One day, we three boys were set to plant an acre of sugar beets. No one knew whether they would grow in this climate or not, but Alexander Frayden was not mindful of such trifling questions. Armed with a table fork, and with a gunny sack upon which to kneel, slowly we crept along, sticking the fork into the ground an inch or two and depositing in each hole not more than two seeds, which we packed down with our hands. This operation we repeated every four or five inches. Some of our neighbors passing by learned what we were doing and laughed. Doubtless it was the funniest thing these hard-headed men had ever seen on a farm. My stepfather was enraged at their mirth, or rather, at their "stupidity," as he put it, and we were compelled to finish our task, much to our disgust. We knew that we were being made fools of in the eyes of the neighbors, and yet, not knowing how the beets should be planted, we yielded a protesting obedience.

Again, one day he set us to planting potatoes. After digging trenches two feet deep, we lined them with manure, laying the potato cuttings with eye up directly upon the fertilizer. Sprinkling soft dirt over the cuttings, we laid another layer of fertilizer and then more dirt until we had a mound as high as a celery bed. Upon this we poured barrels of water. Needless to say, the potatoes were burned before they had a chance to sprout and all we had for our pains was the information, vouchsafed by one of the settlers, that Alexander Frayden was a fool.

Holy Ghost Jones had kept his word and called upon us a few days after our arrival. We soon learned that these visits were frequent and that he and my stepfather were great friends. What this strange man saw in my equally strange stepfather, I could not understand. On the other hand, the evangelist could boast of only the most meager learning, while Alexander Frayden was a man of education and intellect. Irene was unkind enough to attribute Holy Ghost Jones's attraction to our well-filled table rather than to my stepfather. Certainly, during the first year of our life on the prairies, there was no farmer who set so good a table as that found at Frayden's Folly, for my stepfather was a lover of good food.

At this time, our kitchen shelves were loaded with provisions of all kinds, while our neighbors were living on nothing but that which they could raise, supplemented by a few bags of flour, a little sugar, coffee, and tea. It was no wonder that they took to visiting our home whenever their work permitted it. Such visits then were welcomed, for they usually overcame my stepfather's sullen moods and in fact often forestalled them.

I did not know at the time, and had I been told, I should not have appreciated, the responsibility which my stepfather must have assumed in moving us to this virgin country. It meant that every dollar of mother's money was pledged to the enterprise. Already disappointment, aggravated by delay, had threatened my stepfather's plans. He had come with high hopes and honest intentions to make a winning stroke. Looking backward, I now can see that defeat stared him in the face from the start. Later, one crushing blow after another was to come. In the light of more mature understanding, I have been able to forgive much that otherwise would seem unpardonable.

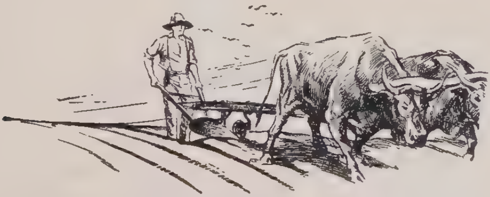
CHAPTER SIX

OUR FIRST YEAR ON THE PLAINS

LIFE at Frayden's Folly was not all unpleasant. Life on a farm was new to me, the experiences were full of interest, and although I was anxious to take my part, it was some time before I was required to become inured to the hard work. During the first year, heavy work for me was not necessary, as we still kept two or three hired men most of the time. I longed to hold the breaking-plow; but as this was beyond my strength, I walked the newly-made furrows in the wake of Jake and the oxen. Strips of green sod, four inches or more in thickness, were cut through by the coulter of the plow and then turned over in long black ribbons about twelve inches wide. So tough was the sod that yards and yards of this ribbon of earth would wind off without a break.

Following the plow in a furrow a half-mile long, to retrace our steps in another furrow, making a few rounds a day; the smell of virgin earth, the breath of cattle on a frosty day in early fall, the tang of clear air in the nostrils, the occasional frightening of a covey of prairie chickens; the sight of a flock of wild geese overhead — all this gave zest to our new life.

After our disastrous experience in planting sugar beets and choice varieties of potatoes, my stepfather finally



"Following the plow in a furrow a half-mile long."

decided to act upon the advice of the settlers. As a result, our first year on the plains brought us an abundant crop. Oats were so heavy on the low lands that they had to be cut with a scythe. Wheat stacks fairly groaned with wealth. Corn was in abundance and the potatoes planted on sod were large and heavy. Rutabagas, onions, and other root crops, to say nothing of squash, pumpkins, and melons overflowed the bins in our cellar. Chickens by the score ran about the barnyard, while a large flock of turkeys perched at night upon the roof of the house, the highest spot on the farm they could find. We had indeed found another Land, not only of Promise, but of Plenty. My stepfather lost no occasion to justify himself for his foresight in bringing us to this land of "milk and honey." Surely we had much to be thankful for, and yet, we were not altogether pleased with his boasting.

Our first harvest had passed and now all was in readiness for the coming of winter, and this year it came early.

Thanksgiving Day dawned in a threatening storm. The night before, a great white ring had encircled the moon. Now the sun slowly mounted the heavens in company with two angry sun dogs, one on the right and the other on the left. By noon, the air was thick with snow. It fell in great white curtains, rolling up on the ground. Before evening, the wind seemed to come from every quarter of the compass. In great eddies swirled the snow until no longer could we see the barn from the house. Soon the road directly in front of the house was blotted out, and then, with arctic suddenness, the darkness of night fell upon our first blizzard.

For three days and three nights the storm raged. On the morning of the fourth day, the snow ceased to fall and the clouds gradually parted, revealing the traitor sun; then, with the lowering of the wind, the thermometer dropped and dropped until we thought we should freeze to death in the exposed shell of a house which the neighbors so well had named "Frayden's Folly."

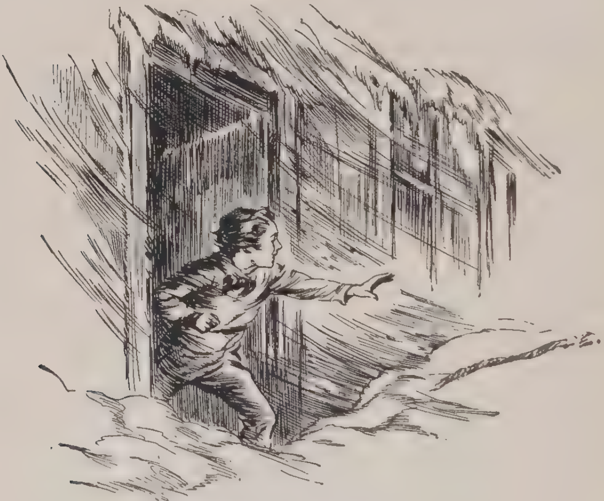
Huddled around the hard-coal burner, we almost scorched our faces, while our backs were nearly freezing. In bed, we piled great buffalo robes upon us until we no longer could stand the weight. Morning found the moisture from our breath frozen in icicles which, hanging from our lips, had attached themselves to the edge of the fur robes. Little piles of snow driven through the nail holes stood pyramid-like upon the floor.

Holy Ghost Jones, who had been invited to our Thanksgiving dinner, was compelled by the blizzard to remain with us until the storm abated. This, we children did not relish, but my stepfather took much satisfaction in his companionship.

The presence of the evangelist seemed to revive some of the religious practices that had been frequently interrupted by my stepfather's fits of rage. Work on the farm during the busy season had not permitted the usual protracted family prayers. Verses and the singing of a hymn had been dispensed with, and the services otherwise curtailed, according to the spiritual status of my stepfather. Now that winter had set in and we had little to do other than the chores incident to caring for the stock, the abbreviated form of family worship gave place to the old services.

"This certainly has been a season of grace, Brother Frayden," the evangelist remarked, as he was taking his leave after his prolonged stay following the Thanksgiving dinner. "We need a revival in these parts," he continued. "The people must be stirred up. The winter must not pass without organizin' a church. In the name of the Lord, Brother, I demand that you assume your rightful perogative as a lay-preacher and aid me in the work of the vineyard."

It was not hard to persuade my stepfather to appear in public, or to help organize anything that needed organizing, so long as he could be the leader; and it was agreed between them that steps should be taken to start a revival, with the avowed purpose of perfecting a church of which Mr. Jones was to be the pastor.



"I sprang into the storm."

The morning on which he left us had dawned clear and cold. With no heat in the bedrooms, with little piles of snow on the floors, it took much moral courage to toss aside the buffalo robes and jump out of bed. We soon were dressed, however, and proceeded to feed the stock we had been forced to neglect for at least two days. Late in the afternoon of the first day of the blizzard, we had been able to reach the barn, although with much difficulty, and had piled the mangers high with hay. We had also been able to water the animals, but they were in great need of both food and water before we could reach them again. On the second morning we had tried to reach the barn, but without success. To risk the short distance between house and barn might mean freezing to death. Once brother William tried it, but the attempt only met with disaster.

Tying a rope about his waist, we fastened the other end to the kitchen door. The wind coming from the northwest filled the air with fine snow, almost to the point of suffocation. It was as impenetrable to sight as a dense wall of fog. As William told us afterward, on going out of doors his warm face became wet from the beating, blinding, powdery snow that melted as it struck his face. At once his face began to freeze and in a moment his eyes were frozen shut. The wind made it almost impossible to breathe and he became so confused that he lost all sense of direction. Feeling the rope about his waist draw taut, he realized that it was not long enough to reach the barn, and he turned in the direction of the house; as he turned, the rope loosened from its fastening on the door jamb and he fell blindly into a snowdrift.

As it happened, I opened the kitchen door in time to see the rope gliding out of sight in the snow. Not realizing my own peril, without hat or coat, to the help of my brother I sprang into the storm. Down I went, floundering upon my face in the snow. As I fell, I reached out with one arm, instinctively, and succeeded in catching hold of the fast disappearing rope. Quickly jumping to my feet, I started back toward the house; but William kept pulling in the opposite direction, and it was not until James came to the rescue that I succeeded in regaining the door, dragging the now almost exhausted lad back to safety.

I had hardly reached the door before my stepfather pulled me into his arms and began rubbing my hands, ears and face with handfuls of snow. Indignant, I began to struggle.

"Be quiet!" he commanded. "Your face and hands have been nipped. This snow will take the frost out."

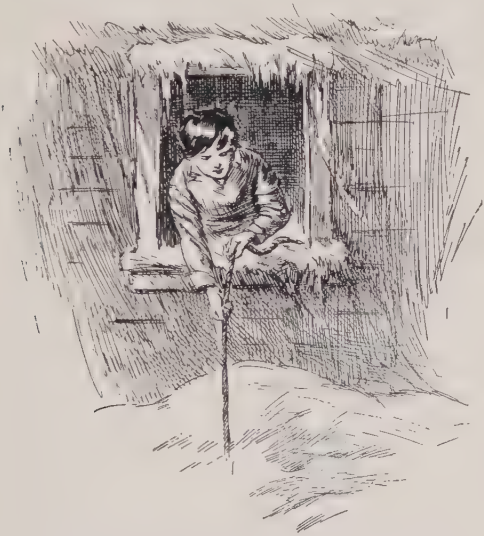
William also received the same rough yet kindly treatment. His nose and ears were deadly white; but, after being persistently rubbed with snow, they once more exhibited a healthy glow.

After this experience, we abandoned all efforts to feed the stock that day. The next morning we knew we must make a strenuous effort to reach the barn; but upon opening the kitchen door, we were confronted by a wall of snow higher than the door itself. We had no shovel within the house, other than a small coal shovel. Poking into the drift with a broom handle, we found the snow too deep to be removed without a larger implement. As we raised the window curtains, we saw that the windows had been banked over by the drifts and that exit this way was out of the question. Even if we could get to the barn, we realized that the tools were all inside it, and probably the door would be barred by the drifts.

Running upstairs, I succeeded in opening a window and, looking out, found that the snow had drifted to within six feet of the second-story window ledge. Calling my brother, I proposed that we slide down the drift to the ground, but he was afraid that our weight would cause us to sink out of sight into the drift.

The previous evening, the weather had moderated somewhat and consequently the snow had been heavy with moisture, but during the night the temperature had dropped again and a frozen crust had formed on top of the snow.

My stepfather, who heard the window open, came into the room to see what we were doing. When I explained my idea, he said that both William and James were too heavy to attempt the experiment.



"My brother carefully let out the rope."

"Let me try it. I weigh only eighty-five pounds," I pleaded, eager for the adventure.

"We might tie a rope about his waist so that if he breaks through the crust we can pull him out of the drift," James suggested.

My stepfather reluctantly helped me bundle up in a buffalo coat; and with a skin cap pulled well down over my ears and big woolen boots that reached above my knees, I waited eagerly while they fastened the rope about my middle.

With the coal shovel in hand, I climbed out of the window, while my brothers carefully let out the rope, holding it sufficiently taut so that not all my weight would rest upon the snowy crust.

Holding my breath from excitement, I let myself down gradually, spreading out my buffalo coat upon the snow as I sat down upon it.

"Let go!" I cried, as I felt myself safely seated upon the crust of the drift, and then, as the boys played out the rope, I gently slid to the bottom of the drift. Loosening myself from the rope, I ran to the barn, only to find that the door was completely hidden by drifts. It was out of the question, of course, to dig through the frozen snow with the small shovel.

Suddenly I remembered a small window near the door, just a foot or two below the roof. Retracing my steps a few paces, I circled toward the back of the barn. Here the roof was nearly even with the small hill that formed one side of the barn, and from which the barn, in fact, had been partly excavated. In a few minutes I was on top of the barn. Lying on the roof, I slowly scooped the snow away from the window. In a short time I had it cleared. Then, letting myself down from the roof, I found a foothold upon the window ledge. With a few good kicks, I smashed the frame and, loosening it, pushed it out.

A cloud of steam from the cattle-heated interior burst out upon the wintry atmosphere. Jumping through the window to the floor of the barn, I was greeted by the lusty bellowing of the cattle and the neighing of the suffering horses; but as hay had to be brought from the outside, I could do nothing to relieve their needs without the aid of my brothers.

I soon found a couple of shovels, and it was not long before I again was on the roof and on my way back to the house. It looked hopeless for me to clear away the immense drifts that nearly covered one side of the house, sealing the kitchen door, so I started to tunnel through the drift, making an opening just large enough to crawl through. In half an hour I reached the door which, fortunately, opened on the inside.

My brothers and my stepfather were now able to make their way to the barn and, before long, the stock was fed and watered.

Such was the opening of our first winter upon the western plains and the beginning of our life at Frayden's Folly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

OUR FORTUNES WAVER IN THE BALANCE

THE encouragement that came at the beginning of my stepfather's costly experiments did not last. Although the crops were abundant the first year, the acreage we had been able to put in was small, so that the actual cash realized was far from large. The corn and oats were no more than sufficient to meet the needs of the live stock. Wheat, in fact, was the only product we had to market, and that brought little ready money.

With the coming of the second spring, Alexander Frayden must have realized that mother's money would not last indefinitely, for we boys were made to take the place of the hired men, who had been discharged at the end of the fall plowing. We always had assisted with the farm work, when we cared to do so; now, however, we were set to work in earnest.

Another evidence of our dwindling fortune was the rapid disappearance of supplies from the pantry shelves. The teams long since had ceased their weekly pilgrimage to Blunt for a renewal of provisions, and now my stepfather took to cautioning us to be careful with our clothes and more economical in the use of all supplies.

Coming out of the barn one day, I noticed Holy Ghost Jones and my stepfather standing in the shadow of the haystack. The latter seemed desirous of not being seen from the house. Boyish curiosity caused me to hesitate as I left the barn and then, sensing my stepfather's effort to avoid being seen, I became perplexed, as I could not continue on my way without passing him. Afraid to retrace my steps for fear of attracting attention, I slipped around the opposite end of the haystack; but, as I did so, the speakers moved in my direction, the better to avoid being seen from the house.

"Brother Jones," I heard my stepfather say, "much as I should like to help the Lord's work, I cannot do as I planned this year."

"That's all right, I'm sure, Brother Frayden! You were more than liberal last year. That last hundred came in most welcome. It was a pleasant Christmas surprise."

"I can let you have a hundred now and perhaps another hundred or so in the fall," replied my stepfather, as he extracted a roll of bills from his pocket and handed it to his companion.

"God bless you, brother," replied the evangelist. "His work never would have been possible in the county, had it not been for your generosity last year. Thanks to you, His vineyard need not go without tilling this spring, either. Your example ought to shame the other settlers. Nary one of 'em is so generous or so endowed with the right spirit as you. But are you sure you can spare it, Brother Frayden?"

I was satisfied that the man had no intention of wheedling money from my stepfather. The preacher is usually "worthy of his hire," despite the distorted doctrines of a few, and it was to the credit of Preacher Jones that he never withheld a dollar if it meant anything to some needy settler.

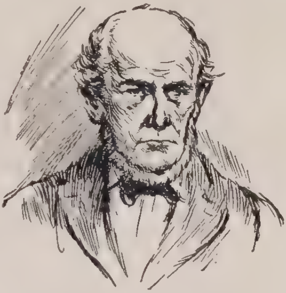
I determined not to say anything to mother about what I had overheard, and I was afraid to mention it even to brother William, as he was growing more and more intolerant of our stepfather, and I did not wish to add fuel to a fire that was already burning brightly. Considering the economies that my stepfather was making in the operation of the farm, his liberal contribution to the evangelist seemed out of all proportion to his means. Fearful of the outcome of his experiment in farming, he had become almost parsimonious with the family.

A few days after this incident, I jumped on my pony and rode over to Rounds', our nearest neighbor, to do an errand for my stepfather. There was nothing I enjoyed quite so much as riding over the prairies.

Frayden's Folly was situated at the head of the Blue Blanket Valley, which ran north and south throughout the entire width of the county. Its name probably had been derived from the fact that the blue-joint found in the sloughs made a kind of blanket of verdure for the valley.

It must not be supposed that this was a deep valley paralleled on each side by high hills, such as may be found in mountainous country. Rather it consisted of rolling prairie, the elevated rim of its western border having been formed from the hills and buttes that followed the Missouri River, while its eastern rim consisted of a range of hills that marked the limits of the county in that direction.

The Rounds family lived a few miles east of us. Samuel Rounds was a man past fifty, medium of height and spare of build, his bald head fringed by a circle of sandy hair, with a similar circlet below and around his smoothly shaven jaws. Thin lips revealed an avaricious and exacting nature while a prominent nose told the story of a man determined to forge ahead. Although the family was not one to which my mother would have looked for her friends, Alexander Frayden had taken a great liking to Rounds, perhaps because of a similarity of religious views. According to Rounds' statement, God had blessed them with eleven children. The father had been responsible for naming the boys from his favorite Biblical characters, while the mother had named the girls from the flowers of her old-home garden.



Samuel Rounds.

Zeke Rounds was a boy of about my own age. He was tall for his years. His bushy sandy hair never seemed to be combed and this gave him an air of untidiness which his slouchy manner accentuated. Instinctively, I disliked Zeke Rounds, although I tolerated him because of his sister Violet.

Violet Rounds was a tomboy; at least so said her mother. She could outride her brothers, and many were the dare-devil races we ran across the prairies. Slender of build, wiry and strong as a boy, she could hold her own with any one when it came to outdoor sports. Yet her lustrous brown eyes, her dark hair and rosy cheeks and lips, kept for her a girlish charm that formed a strange combination with her boyish traits. She was a few months older than I but she soon became my close friend and pal. In time I learned to trust her with the story of my troubles and perplexities, even as I came to depend upon her for advice.

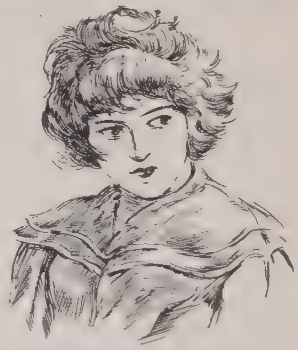
It was no wonder, then, that an errand to Samuel Rounds' farm was a secret pleasure to me. Having accomplished the errand upon which my stepfather had sent me, I had turned the pony toward home when Violet came galloping around the barn on a broncho.

"Where are you going, Don?" she asked.

"Home," I answered shortly.

"I'll ride a piece with you; that is, if you can keep up with me."

In answer, I dug my toes into the pony's flanks and was off before she realized it. She accepted the challenge and came after me, but I had made a quarter of a mile before she caught up.



"Violet Rounds was a tomboy."

"Smarty!" she called as she leaned over and caught a rein of my bridle, pulling my pony down to a walk. "What's your hurry, Don?"

"Same hurry you were in the other day," I replied, referring to a hasty call of hers at Frayden's Folly the previous day.

Ignoring my remark, she abruptly asked, "Say, Don, is your father rich?"

"Why, no! Why do you ask?" I inquired, surprised at the suddenness of her strange question. "You know I told you he hadn't a cent before he married mother."

"Well, you know we're poor as church mice; couldn't even find money enough to move out here, there were so many of us. Didn't you know your stepfather paid all our traveling expenses? Father and the boys helped drive the teams and cattle your stepfather bought in Minnesota."

"This is news to me," I answered.

"Father works hard enough," Violet continued, "but somehow it seems to take so much money and we don't even have the machines we actually need on the farm. Why, just last night he said he had to have a pulverizer. Holy Ghost Jones had been telling him how liberal your father was with him last year; said he gave him over three hundred dollars. Father told mother you folks were rich and that he was going to borrow a hundred and fifty dollars from Frayden. Mother didn't want him to, but when dad makes up his mind no one can stop him. I guess he asked your stepfather for the money all right, for that note you brought over for father had a check pinned to it."

I was too astounded at this further evidence of my stepfather's improvidence to reply.

"What's the matter, Don?" she questioned as she noticed my silence.

"Oh, nothing! I was just thinking that, the way things are going, we shall be doing the borrowing before another year," I answered. "My stepfather can't keep a dollar and I guess there's not much money left. There is no more property to be sold, either," I added, as an afterthought.

More than once during the next few months, I learned accidentally of my stepfather's loans to our neighbors, all of them unsecured, made on a verbal promise to pay. Although but about fifteen, I was serious-minded and often troubled myself about problems that usually fall to adults for solution; hence, as I became aware of my stepfather's continued lack of foresight, I could not help wondering what the outcome would be. This short conversation with Violet Rounds had given me a great deal to think about.

In the fall, after the harvesting of the first crop, the acreage had been plowed and dragged for spring sowing. Spring had come early, and before the first of April the sowing had been completed. The early rains had washed away the snow. Every slough and ravine was trickling with water. The yellow grass of the previous year, hidden during the winter by the snow, had given place to a covering of velvet green that stretched mile after mile like some fairy carpet. The intense blue of the prairie skies, in which huge, steam-like clouds sailed by majestically, made of the landscape a painting beyond compare. Lavender-blue crocuses studded the emerald prairies like rare gems in a setting of green gold. The song of the meadow lark filled the air with music. An occasional gopher running in the grass proclaimed the season as well advanced.

It was amid such charms that I gained my first actual farm experience. Although it was exhausting, the work was exhilarating. The strangeness and the beauty of the country obliterated the commonplace, while every zephyr brought new sensations and conjectures to the dreams of adolescence.

It was not strange that at this period of youth, amid such surroundings, poetry made its first appeal to me. I took to reading it. I memorized it by the page. To every changing scene and experience, I sought to apply some suitable line or verse. In fact, I rapidly was becoming a dreamer.

Across the plowed fields, I drove a team hitched to a wagon partly filled with sacks of seed wheat. The tailboard had been removed and in its place had been fitted a broadcast sower, a hopper-like apparatus into which my brother emptied the seed. A chain, properly geared, connected this device with the hub of the wagon wheel, so that each revolution of the wheel caused the gearing on the sower to revolve, throwing the wheat in great sprays a distance of ten or twelve feet from the wagon. In this way we rapidly completed the spring sowing.

More breaking must be done, however, while the sod was wet from the rains and melting snow, and before haying time. Some of this sod could be broken in time to sow it to flax, but the late breaking must lie fallow until the following spring, unless it could be made ready

A meadow lark.

for flax or planted to corn. Breaking sod was an arduous task, as it had to be done with a walking plow drawn by four horses, or a yoke of good cattle. The sod of rich, black loam was tied together by tough grass roots, including those of the almost unbreakable wire grass. It took the strength of a well developed man to keep the plowshare in the sod. In fact, it was all that my brothers could do to manage the refractory plow.

It looked so easy to me, however, that I asked William to let me hold the plow. Laughingly, he waited until the plow was running easily and the oxen were laboring at a steady gait, and then, holding down the plow handles, he shouted to me to take them.

"Bear down hard!" he cried, as he let go of the handles.

How easy it seemed! The coulter cut through like a keen knife and the plowshare slid under the sod without any effort on my part to direct it. I felt a keen exhilaration and a sense of pride as I trudged behind the mammoth oxen that drew the plow before me; but, had I fully appreciated the character of Bright, the off ox, I should have been more wary. Bright was an "ornery ox," as Jake once said, and now proved it by suddenly acquiring a disinclination to keep the furrow.

"Gee, Bright!" yelled William, but as Bright "gee-ed" the plow struck an especially large bunch of wire-grass roots, quivered, and then stopped, throwing me over the handles. I picked myself up, unhurt but very much chagrined, and satisfied that there was more poetry in watching the plow than in holding down its handles.

Day after day, brother William continued with the breaking and as fast as he completed a few acres, I followed with the pulverizer, or disc harrow, an implement that cut the sod into slathers. Then having dragged it with a harrow, we soon were ready to sow it to flax and in time had twenty acres seeded down.

One night, as William unhitched the cattle from the plow and drove them home, a neighbor, passing by, stopped to talk with him, so he turned the oxen loose to make their own way to the barn. The cattle, unusually thirsty, rushed for a barrel of water that stood near the house, kept on hand there for household use.

During the first year or two, the early settlers were unable to find water in abundance. A few shallow wells had been sunk in the ravines, but the supply of water generally was not plentiful enough for both the stock and the house. Often these wells were far from the farmer's house or barn. As a consequence, the few settlers who had struck water in abundance made a practice of offering the use of their wells to the surrounding farmers. In the spring, the slough water, of course, was welcomed for stock purposes.

The settler without a well would drive his stock to the nearest watering-place, taking with him great water-tanks mounted on wagon wheels, or barrels hauled on stone boats. For these reasons, water was the settler's most cherished possession. The family drinking-water was kept in barrels; a gunny-sack over the open mouth of each barrel, held in place by a steel hoop, to a certain extent protected the water from dirt, but in the summer time the hot rays of the sun soon made the water unpalatable. During the winter, the laden barrels had to be kept in the house, and then the water often froze.

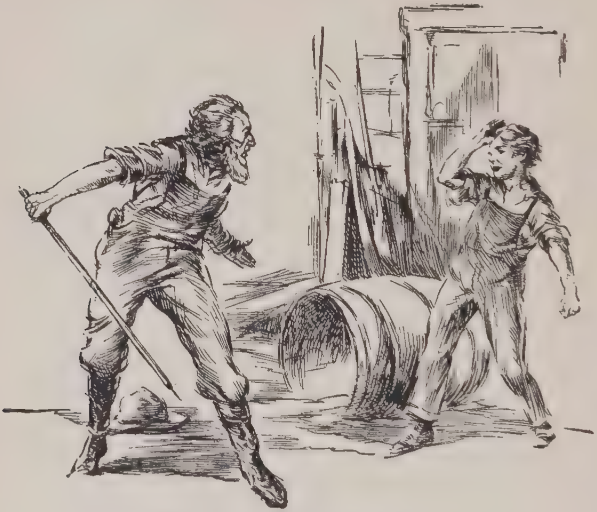
The loss of even a barrel of drinking-water meant temporary privation and a long trip to the nearest well. What, then, was my brother's dismay as he saw the cattle headed for the water-barrel! Running after them, he reached the oxen just in time to see Bright stick his nose into the barrel and knock it over, spilling the precious fluid upon the prairie sod. Just at that moment my stepfather, coming from the house, saw what had happened. Grabbing the goad out of brother William's hand, he jabbed it first into one ox and then into the other. Taking to their heels, with my irate stepfather after them, the cattle, freed from their yoke, ran down the road. It was not, however, until my stepfather was exhausted from the chase that he gave it up and started back toward the house.

My brother's dismay and my stepfather's wrath were both justified, for the wanton waste of a barrel of water seemed almost a tragedy to the early Dakota pioneers. The four great factors in the life of the settlers upon the plains were the almost ceaseless winds, the pitiless heat, the remorseless cold, and the cruel absence of water. Every drop was precious. We were not surprised, then, at Alexander Frayden's outburst of anger. As he drew near, I could see that he was dangerously excited. His red whiskers, parted by the wind, blew over his shoulders, while his bushy, sandy hair stood up in the breeze like a peacock's tail.

Excited by his shouting, Aunt Mary and mother had come out to see what was the trouble. My sisters also appeared, and with them my stepbrother James.

I could hear my stepfather, fairly winded, panting for breath, and as he approached, the few words which reached my ears sounded most unscriptural. Mother stood, strangely white and silent, afraid of the coming storm. Aunt Mary, nervous and frightened, paced up and down.

"Why did you let them get away, you fool!" my stepfather cried as he turned upon William.



"William dodged just in time."

"For a fool like you to chase!" William instantly responded.

"William! Oh, William!" mother exclaimed, piteously.

Raising the goad in his hand, my stepfather brought it down with a force that would have felled my brother to the earth had it hit him, but William dodged just in time. The goad hit the ground, fell from my stepfather's hand, and rebounding, struck him full in the face.

Maddened, like a blinded bull, with both fists clenched and raised above his head as if he would strike him to the earth, he bore down upon William. Brother did not budge. I could see his face turn pale, but whether he was paralyzed from fright or contained with a dangerous coolness, I did not know. Instantly I realized that if my stepfather's upraised fists fell upon my brother, there would be murder done. I snatched up the fallen goad and just as Alexander Frayden made to strike, I tripped him and he fell with a thud to the sod.

Released from the confines of the Castle's gloomy walls, thrust suddenly out upon the plains of a new country and given a new freedom, I had been gradually losing my timidity and sense of fear, but now my newly found courage suddenly deserted me. In a moment, however, my stepfather's actions convinced me that he thought he had tripped himself. My fears subsided somewhat, but I glanced with apprehension at my stepbrother, who could not have failed to see my intervention.

My little freckled-faced, red-headed stepbrother stood watching his father's discomfiture, his own hands clenched, looking for all the world like a little bantam rooster ready to fight. Whether James intended to run to the rescue of his father, or not, I did not know until Alexander Frayden came to earth and then, to my amazement, James whispered to me hoarsely, "Good! Good! Serves him right!"

By this time, both mother and Aunt Mary were crying, mother with her apron over her head as if to shut out the sight and Aunt Mary nervously shouting, "You big coward! Serves you right! God will punish you yet for your cruelty, you beast!"

Slowly picking himself up, Alexander Frayden, now deadly white, pointed at William and commanded him to go bring in the cattle.

"I brought them in and you drove them off," William replied. "I have broken sod from daylight until supper time, while you sat around all day reading the papers.

Who wouldn't run from a fiend like you? Seeing that you drove them away, you can drive them back. I'll not stir a step to get them."

"You little whelp! You get those cattle or I'll brain you!" yelled my stepfather. With a bound he made for William, who took to his heels.

Down the road ran my tired brother, but he was not too tired to keep out of reach of Alexander Frayden, who soon came to a stop. As he turned in chagrin and walked back, the women folks went into the house, while James and I ran to the barn and climbed a haystack, from which vantage point we waved to William, who, after waving back, turned toward the fast-descending western sun.

"Where do you suppose he is going?" I asked James.

"He's going to run away from home. Told me he would sooner or later," James answered. "I'm going to myself, pretty soon. I can't stand father's domineering any longer."

Silently, we watched my brother as he trudged into the west. With every foot of progress he grew smaller and smaller. Soon the shadows, mingling with the road, shut him from our sight and we knew that the farm never would see him again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AN OLD INDIAN FIGHTER

Not a word was said by my stepfather about my brother's absence as silently we gathered around the supper table. My stepfather showed no disposition to ask a blessing. Looking up in mild surprise, mother asked, "Are you not going to say grace?"

"Say it yourself, if you want it said," he retorted.

The tears ran down mother's face. Aunt Mary looked horrified. We children were afraid to say a word or to show our feelings in any way and the meal went on without any comment upon the scene that had caused my brother to leave home.

That night my mother conducted family prayers, my stepfather taking no part other than to recite his verse with the rest of us. I could not help feeling sorry for him; why, I did not exactly know. Perhaps he realized that he had gone too far with William.

Day after day passed with no word from my brother. I often found mother in tears. Aunt Mary did not hesitate to express her alarm at William's continued absence. "Perhaps the Indians have caught him," she suggested. "Oh, why did I ever come to this terrible country? Maybe the wolves or the wildcats have made away with him!"

It soon became evident that my brother had no intention of returning home. Fortunately, the crops were all in. There would be no heavy work until fall. The haying season was upon us, but James and I could manage that without much difficulty.

The settlers were compelled to depend upon the sloughs and ravines and dry lake beds for their hay. Although ests. "Where do you suppose William went?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Dunno," answered James. "Mebbe Blunt."

"What would he do there?"

"Get a job, of course," James replied.

"Who's that coming?" I suddenly exclaimed, pointing to the section line that intersected the north and south road upon which we were traveling.

"None of the neighbors," James laconically replied.

"Looks something like Holy Ghost Jones," I suggested.

The stranger who was approaching from the west rode a broncho that was too small for him. I was reminded of the night when we had overtaken the prairie preacher.

As the rider drew nearer, I felt a sinking sensation about the pit of my stomach. My knees seemed to find a strange companionship for each other; my limbs trembling so that I scarcely could stand without leaning upon the front of the hay rack. James was too much engrossed in making out the approaching stranger to notice my discomfiture.

"I wonder if he'll know me?" I thought.

"Hello, boys!" he shouted. "Where do you belong?"

"Frayden's Folly," I answered, as James seemed loath to reply.

"'Folly' is right," he remarked. "On my way there now. Frayden's yer dad, I s'pose? Got another brother, ain't ye?"

"Yes, — William." I haltingly answered. "But he — he's gone and we don't know where."

"What'll yer give if I tell yer where he's at?" he questioned.

"Bill? Oh, he's goin' to git a job somewheres, but I told him not to be in a hurry an' to make hisself to home with me till he located."

"Did — did you ever kill an Indian?" James suddenly ventured.

"Kill an Injun! Bless yer soul, yes. I've lived right in these parts since sixty. In th' fall of seventy-three, I had a fine bunch of cattle on th' Little Cheyenne — that's only 'bout fifteen mile frum here — an' th' pesky Sioux got away with seventeen head one night. Never would 've got 'em, 'f I'd bin home. Some of 'em come 'round agin, th' night I come back from Fort Sully, but they sees me jest as they wuz roundin' up some of my fine steers. I got one, though. Dropped him like a shot frum his pony, but one of th' other Injuns reached over an' grabbed him an' pulled him 'cross his own pony while on th' run."

"Kill him?" I breathlessly asked.

"Yep, deader than a stone. You bet they didn't bother roun' my corral after that, when I wuz home."

By this time, my fear of the man had disappeared and I was greatly relieved to know that he had not recognized me. I did not feel that it was necessary to tell James about our first meeting.

"Did they — did they shoot you in the eye?" timidly asked James, somewhat afraid to express the curiosity he could not repress.

"Not that time," the old man replied. "I got that with an arrow in th' sixties. I had been up on th' Moreau River an' had jest come back to Fort Sully. Th' Commandant of th' Fort wanted me to act as scout fur a han'ful of sojers that wuz takin' some money an' provishuns to a detachment north of here. Th' Capt'n said as how they had ten thousan' dollars in gold with 'em, that wuz to be relayed to Fort Berthold by th' sojers we wuz to meet.

"We got as far north as what's now Farmer City on th' Missouri, when a big band of Sioux swept down on us frum th' north an', 'fore we knew it, an arrow pierced th' Capt'n's heart an' two or three o' th' sojers wuz badly wounded. It was important to get th' gold to th' Fort and as there wuz no one left in charge, I grabbed th' bag th' Capt'n wuz carryin' an' ran fur th' woods. I got to th' river, where I knew there wuz a canoe hidden, an' thinkin' I hadn't bin seen, I jumped into th' canoe an' paddled away frum th' shore. Th' current carried me down stream, but I started to cross th' river an wuz jest roundin' a sand bar when I heard th' pesky Injun's yell. There they stood on th' shore, mad as hornets. A dozen arrows flew 'bout my head an' then I tumbled over in th' bottom of th' canoe. An arrow had struck in there," he continued, pointing to the wound on his cheek, "an' another hit me in th' eye; jest glanced sidewise but it killed th' sight all right. I must hev keeled over with th' pain. Th' Injuns didn't know 'bout th' gold. They thought I wuz dead, an' they paid no further 'tention to me. Must have bin an hour or more that I drifted with th' current. Then I struck a sand bar an' next thing I knowed I wuz in th' water. This brought me to life an' I struck out fur shore, but th' gold an' the canoe went to th' bottom of th' Missouri. How I got back to Fort Sully, I never knowed."

With open mouths, James and I drank in every word. The account had a more gripping interest for us than the tales we had read in the blood-and-thunder story papers we used to smuggle into the Castle. The old fighter's story rang with reality and truth. Before we realized it, darkness had come and we jumped to our feet in haste, as it was long past the time when we were expected home.

"You kids like to come over to my place an' see yer brother?" asked the old scout.

"Would we?" both of us exclaimed.

"Well, I'm on my way to see yer old man. You know they're organizin' this 'ere county an' they're goin' to locate a county seat an' those what lives on th' Missouri wants Farmer City to have it. One of th' big guns wants me to bring yer old man over there tomorrow. They wants him to help get th' settlers up here to vote fur Farmer City 'stead of Center Town. If he'll help, they'll 'point him to some big county office."

What organizing the county meant or what a county seat was, we did not know.

"Well, I'll tell him they wants him to bring as many of his family with him as he kin. Yer see, ther's to be a big gatherin' of folks an' if he shows up right smart as a man of importance an' th' head of a family, his chances will be so much th' better."

I knew it would work. If my stepfather had the opportunity of being appointed to an important office, he would consent to almost anything.

"I'll see that you kids come 'long an' I'll take yer to my dugout to see yer brother," he said. "If yer come, I'll give yer a dog," he added, turning to me.

"A dog!" I exclaimed with delight. "What kind of a dog? What's his name?"

"Well, th' Injuns called him White Breast, 'cause he looks as how he wore a white shirt over his breast, I s'pose. He has a yaller coat an' four white moccasins an' a white tip to his tail. I calls him Shep, 'cause he's a collie or sheep dog. I give th' Injuns two bits fur him."

Delighted with the prospect of having a dog and with my mind full of the stories the old Indian fighter had told us, I drove home to Frayden's Folly in great spirits. Manfred led on ahead, as Holy Ghost Jones once had done; scouts, both of them, who later surveyed for us untrodden paths.

CHAPTER NINE

MORE FRONTIER STORIES

Our delay in getting home evidently was interpreted by my stepfather as evidence of suddenly acquired industry. Perhaps he thought we had been intimidated by brother William's experience. Since William had left the farm, James and I were busy from morning until late at night; for all the work fell upon us, my stepfather never deigning to soil his hands at manual toil. But the new interest James and I took in each other gave an added zest to our work, so that it did not seem a hardship.

Manfred was coolly received by my stepfather; but as he proceeded to explain the purpose of his visit, Alexander Frayden's attitude warmed.

"You say that Judge Homer and La Dusk sent you with this message?" my stepfather asked.

"They did!" Manfred replied emphatically. "Furthermore," he continued, "they insisted on yer bringin' as many of the fam'ly as possible. Goin' to be big doings an' all th' settlers in th' western part o' th' county will be there."

"Did I understand you to say that, if I succeeded in getting this township to vote for Farmer City as the county seat, I was to be chosen for one of the county offices?" inquired my stepfather.

"Exactly!" Manfred answered.

At this he graciously invited Manfred to spend the night at Frayden's Folly. As the return journey was long, the old scout agreed to remain over and go with us the next day to Farmer City.

The chores done and the stock taken care of, we hurried to the house. I had not seen my stepfather so amiable for many a week. Full of wit and gaiety, he entertained us with tales of his travels and experiences. For every wonderful story told us by the old Indian fighter, my stepfather had a more marvelous one to relate. It was a refreshing change of spirit for us all.

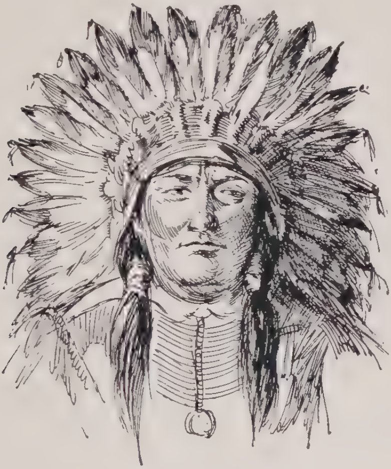
The decision was that mother, James, and I were to accompany my stepfather to Farmer City. He and my mother occupied the buggy, while James and I each rode a broncho. This arrangement delighted us because we were eager to hear more of the old scout's early exploits among our nearby neighbors, the Sioux.

The Missouri River marked the western boundary of our county. The country west of the river had been set apart by the Federal Government as a reservation for the Indians. Here the various tribes that remained of the Sioux confederation were gathered, directly opposite Farmer City. The Cheyenne Agency, as it was called, was in charge of an "Indian Agent" appointed by the Government. The Indians were not allowed to leave this reservation without a pass from the agent.

Several thousand Sioux Indians, at this time, lived on the reservation. A goodly number of old warriors who had fought Custer in the sixties were there. Among them were Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and other well-known braves, who had never learned to talk much English and who never had become reconciled to their defeat and subjugation by the whites. Besides these full-blooded Indians, there were many half-breeds, some of whom had become addicted to the vices of the white settlers without having acquired many of their virtues.

During an earlier day, a number of French-Canadian trappers had settled along the river, some of them marrying with the Indians. These "squaw men," as they were called, had become well-to-do; many of them owned herds of cattle and horses that numbered into the thousands.

The picture drawn many years ago by Washington Irving, of the American Indian under the influence of the white man, was fairly true of many of the Sioux Indians who had come in contact with vicious white settlers. Among those chosen to represent the Government with the Sioux were a few unscrupulous traders and petty officials who grew wealthy at the expense of the Indians.



Sitting Bull.

It was in the Indian country that Jack Manfred had spent many years of his life, and from him, as we journeyed on the road to Farmer City, we learned of these things.

About noon, we camped on the Little Cheyenne, a mere brook now. Manfred said that in his day it was a running stream flowing into the Missouri River. Along the banks of the Little Cheyenne we found quite a growth of cottonwoods and there we ate our noon meal.

"Ust to be plenty of antelope 'long here," Manfred said, "but there's no game now that's fit to eat, 'cept chick'ns an' wild geese."

After our lunch, the old Indian fighter offered to show us where he had taken part in a real skirmish with the Sioux. Leaving my mother with my stepfather, the three of us mounted our bronchos and started for the battle field, which Manfred said was only about a mile away.

"Th' Sioux nation, yer know," Manfred explained, "wuz made up of many diff'rent tribes. Then there wuz other families of Injuns roaming 'cross th' plains in an early day before my time. One of 'em wuz th' Algonquins; th' Cheyennes belonged to 'em. They lived on th' Cheyenne River, a branch of th' Red River far to th' northeast. They ust to be called th' Cut-Wrists, cuz they cut th' wrists an' bodies of their dead enemies. Some called 'em Dog-eaters, cuz they liked dog flesh. The Sioux an' th' Crees an' th' Assinaboines an' th' Cheyennes was alwuz afightin', an' it got so hot fur th' Cheyennes that they come down here an' settled on th' Little Cheyenne; but, 'bout th' time Lewis an' Clark come up th' Missouri, they had moved to th' Big Cheyenne near the Black Hills. 'Cross th' Missouri, at th' mouth of th' Moreau an' Grand Rivers, lived th' Aricarees. They built their villages there but th' Sioux druv 'em out, so yer see th' Sioux had this here hull country to theirselves.

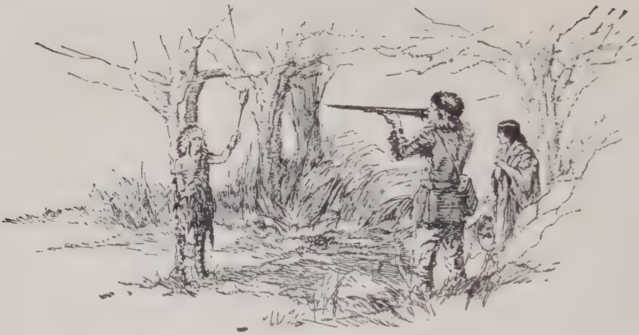
"In th' early sixties, gold an' silver wuz discovered in Montana an' Idaho an' th' folks frum th' States started fur th' West, 'cross these 'ere plains. It didn't seem to make much difference that th' hostile reds wuz roamin' th' prairies at will, with no one to hold 'em in check, fur th' love of gold druv th' riffraff of th' East, with many decent chaps, too, to th' new diggin's in Montana. Finally, what every one expected took place an' we had the Minnesota massacre.

"Then th' Guvermunt woke up and 'stablished forts 'cross th' middle of th' Territory, to th' north of here, an' along th' Missouri River. Then they sent out an expedition under Gineral Sully an' Gineral Sibley to punish th' Redskins an' make 'em sue fur peace.

"May seventeenth, in 1863, I left with th' Second Battalion, in Company B of th' Sixth Iowa Cavalry. We wuz to proceed some four hundred miles up th' Missouri to assist in corrallin' an' punishin' th' hostile Sioux. It was July seventh when we crossed th' Missouri at Fort Pierre, an' then we followed th' river 'til we come to th' mouth of th' Little Cheyenne; this very same crick we are now camped on," Manfred added.

"We turned northeast, leavin' th' course of th' Little Cheyenne. We must hev been in th' neighborhood of Frayden's Folly, say 'bout eight mile further west an' a couple o' mile south, when we captured a Sioux and his squaw. As I wuz th' only one that could talk Injun, I questioned 'em, but nary a word could I git out of 'em.

"I grabbed th' Redskin an', 'fore he knew it, I had him tied to a post we'd druv into th' groun'. Th' red devil had his war-bonnet on an' he wuz dressed in full paint, so I knew as how I had the right party, all right. He carried a bow an' arrows an' a gun, a knife an' a hatchet which we took frum him. 'Hold yer arrow in yer left hand!' I commanded in Sioux. 'Now watch me knock out that secon' feather frum th' middle,' I said, as I dropped back a few rods. *Bang!* went my rifle an' th' feather fluttered to th' groun', but th' Injun



"'Hold yer arrow in yer left hand!' I commanded."

never batted an eye. 'When all the feathers fly, you devil!' I said, 'onless yer tell me where th' rest of th' tribe is, th' next bullet will go through yer eye.' Might just as well talk to th' post, fur my threat seemed to make no impression on him. I could see th' squaw sorter gettin' oneasy, so I let fly as quick as I could shoot. Only one feather wuz left on th' Injun's arrow. 'Only one more, Injun,' I warned, 'an' then it's your turn.' But before I could throw th' rifle to my shoulder th' squaw had me by th' arm.

"'No shoot!' she cried out. 'Ten mile south. Camp on Little Cheyenne.'

"I unfastened th' Injun, and we started south, with th' couple leadin' th' way. The Redskins told us there wuz nine thousan' Injuns in camp an' that they had jest had a fight with Gineral Sibley. This kinda frightened us, 'cause we didn't have force 'nuff to fight nine thousan' Injuns an' we didn't know where Sibley wuz by this time. We sent out scouts, howsumever, an' we found th' main band had broke camp an' moved on to th' northwest, leavin' a small band on th' Little Cheyenne.

"Here's th' spot, right here!" Manfred suddenly cried, as we broke into a little clearing on the north bank of the Cheyenne. "We surrounded 'em here an' what we didn't kill got away frum us. Yer can see some of th' arrows on th' groun' yet," he said, pointing to the spot where had been the Indian camp.

Jumping from our bronchos, we soon were searching for Indian arrows and relics, a few of which we found. They confirmed the truth of the old man's stories, which from the first we had somewhat doubted.

"Jest wait until we gets to Farmer City an' I'll show yer where we had another fight with th' Redskins," the old scout assured us.

It was time for our return. Reluctantly, we left the historic spot, resolving that on the first opportunity we would revisit the scene. Soon we were on the way to our destination and before night were winding our way across what the early French explorers called "Plateau du Coteau Missouri," and then down the western slopes of the buttes that towered several hundred feet above the river.

At our feet, like a great slippery, winding snake, twisted the "Big Muddy," the rays from the setting sun causing the sandbars in the river to glisten like silvery scales on the back of a serpent. A fringe of timber followed the river, in the midst of which nestled the little village of Farmer City, then engaged in political strife for the location of the county seat.

A long, one-story log cabin served as the only hotel. To my mother's dismay, the innkeeper declared he was unable to care for all of our party.

"Let th' boys go with me," Manfred said to my stepfather. "I kin keep 'em all night in my dugout, jest a couple o' mile frum here."

I could see the twinkle in the old scout's eye and knew that he was planning that we should meet brother William, so James and I joined in supplementing his request.

Mother seemed rather disturbed by this suggestion, but since the inn could not care for us all, Manfred's invitation was a happy solution of the problem. As my stepfather gave his consent to the proposal, mother finally acquiesced.

"Be back in the morning not later than eight," she said. Giving our word, we joyfully mounted our ponies again and soon were on our way to Manfred's dugout — and to brother William.

CHAPTER TEN

MY STEPFATHER MAKES A FALSE MOVE

Manfred led us into his hut. It consisted of a large room dug out of the side of a hill; the front wall of the house was sod; the roof was made of poles filled in with a foot or two of matted branches and straw. William was greatly surprised and delighted to see us and to hear about the folks at home.

"You boys have a visit while I put up the bronchs," Manfred thoughtfully suggested.

Question after question tumbled from our lips. Instead of going to Blunt, as James had surmised, William had made his way to Farmer City, where he had met Manfred. Upon learning the boy's story, the old scout had urged William to "put up" with him until he could find work to do.

"You're not going to stay at Frayden's Folly all your life, are you, Don?" William asked me.

"I don't know; I hope not."

"You bet *I* won't," James declared.

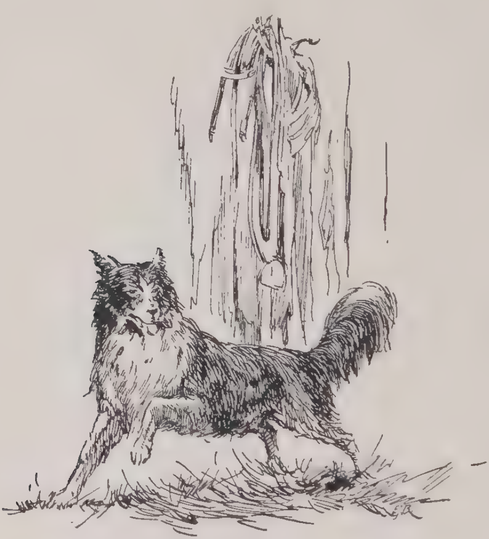
Long into the night we whispered, afraid of keeping Manfred awake. The next morning, we woke bright and early to find awaiting us a breakfast of fish which Manfred had caught in the river before we were up. In the excitement of meeting William, James and I had forgotten the dog Manfred had promised me; as we left the breakfast table, I suddenly remembered White Breast.

"Where — where is the dog, Manfred?" I ventured to ask.

"Jumpin' Jupiter, if I didn't forgit th' pup! He's in th' barn. Come on, boys!" he commanded, as with long strides he made for the door.

"Here, Shep! Here, Shep!" he called, as he opened the barn door. With a bound, from some dim corner, out jumped the dog.

"Oh, isn't he a beauty!" I exclaimed.



"'Here, Shep! Here, Shep!' he called."

Any one who knew dogs could have seen that this was no mongrel. A long, tapering, black nose, a shield of white across his breast, each foot marked in white, a plume-like tail tipped in the same manner, the dog bore all the marks of a full-blooded collie.

"Time to hit th' trail, boys," Manfred said, after we had played with the dog for a few minutes. "Shep'll follow all right."

Soon we were on our way to Farmer City to rejoin the folks. We had persuaded William to accompany us in order to see mother, assuring him that he could find a place to hide in the village if he didn't want Alexander Frayden to see him.

As we rode, we followed the course of the Missouri, which again glistened in the morning sun like a mammoth silvery snake. On each side of the river towered massive buttes, rising one above the other and breaking into terraces hundreds of feet above us, a very different picture from that of the level prairie on which we lived.

Soon we came to the mouth of the Little Cheyenne, which drained into the Missouri. Here Manfred drew rein.

"This spot brings back the story I wuz goin' to tell about yesterday," he said.

"Go on!" James urged, as the old scout seemed lost in meditation.

"Well, it wuz th' summer of '64, and Company B had received orders to open a trail through to th' Yellowstone country. On the twenty-sixth o' June we left Fort Sully, 'bout thirty mile south of here, and that night we camped on th' Okobojo."

"Oh, that's where we had so much trouble in crossing on the way from Blunt," I interrupted.

"Same crick, boy, but we wuz further west. Th' next day, we arrived here and camped right down thar." The old man pointed to a clearing a few yards distant. "A little ways frum here is a place that th' Injuns called 'Med'cine Rock.' The footprints of some human seems to be sunk in th' rock — three of 'em; no one knows how they come there. Guess th' Injuns ust to dance roun' th' rock, for it ust to be circled roun' with beads an' arrow-heads an' other Redskin trinkets.

"Well, th' Capt'n wuz a man by th' name of Fielner. He wuz a reg'lar off'cer in th' Civil War. Fit over fifty battles an' got nary a wound. Th' Rebs got him onct, but he wuz paroled; an' then, bein' as he wuz an engineer, he wuz sent to join Gineral Sully so as to make a survey of this 'ere country.

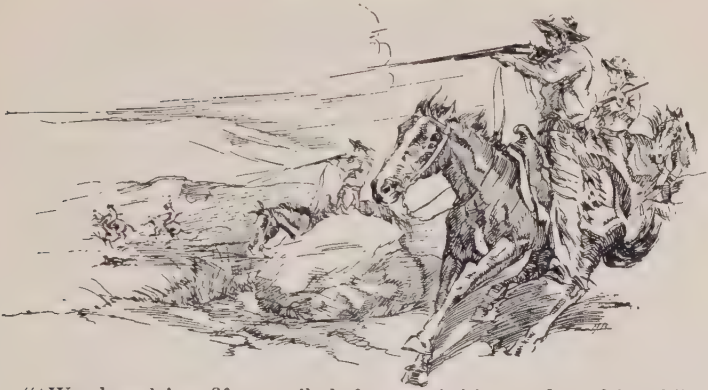
"Well, a part of th' command wuz a company of Dakota scouts that had 'bout twenty Injun sojers. I had command of th' scouts. We alwuz marched way ahead of th' reg'lar command. We had picked out a camp on t'other side of Med'cine Rock. Th' reg'lar command wuz right over there." Manfred pointed to the spot he previously had designated.

"Cap Fielner with two sojers left th' camp to inspec' Med'cine Rock on th' way to join our scouts. We were 'bout a mile from 'em when they picketed their horses an' went down to th' creek to git a drink. Th' reg'lar command wuz s'posed to be followin' 'em. Jest as Capt'n Fielner wuz 'bout to lead his men through a heavy clump of bushes to th' creek, *bang!* went a gun, an' th' Capt'n fell, shot through th' lungs. Three Injuns rushed out of th' bushes an' ran fur th' horses, but at sound of th' shot, th' critters ran away. Th' Redskins turned an' took to their heels. We heard th' shot an' seein' what was up, dashed after th' devils.

"Th' Injuns caught their ponies an' in a second they wuz 'stride of 'em an' on th' jump an' us after 'em. We chased 'em fifteen mile before gettin' in gunshot of 'em; but, little by little, we gained on 'em an' soon a shot brought first one an' then th' others to th' dust. We strapped 'em to their ponies an' brought 'em back to camp.

"Capt'n Fielner lived till 'bout ten o'clock that night. Gineral Sully wuz that enraged he ordered th' heads of th' three Injuns cut off an' we stuck 'em up on poles on th' bank of the river close to this place as a warnin' to other Redskins.

"On the twenty-ninth o' June we reached Swan Crick, not more'n three miles from Frayden's Folly. Here we



"'We chased 'em fifteen mile before gettin' in gunshot of 'em.'"

expected to meet a lot of Minnesota troops, but we didn't connect up with 'em. But th' next day they come, escortin' a immigrant train of over a hundred an' fifty prairie schooners with a colony of people on th' way to Idaho. By this time, we had three thousan' sojers in our command.

"In them days, th' Missouri wuz alive with steamers carryin' freight frum St. Louis to Fort Benton in Montana. Relay riders ust to connect th' forts on th' Missouri an' we had some excitin' times fightin' an' escapin' frum th' Redskins. Well, let's trot on," Manfred said, evidently having finished his story.

"Here's Med'cine Rock," the scout soon announced.

Quickly we dismounted, the better to inspect the rock. It was about fifteen feet across. Upon its surface, plainly could be seen imbedded three imprints of a human foot. The marks or impressions could not have been chiseled in the rock but must have been made when the rock still was as soft as clay.

"William, why not wait here? I'll bring mother out to see the rock," James suggested.

"That's a fine idea," I added.

So it was agreed that we should ride to town and leave William to await our return with mother.

As soon as I could get mother aside, I told her of our meeting with William and of the plan we had arranged. She became so excited that I was fearful she might betray our secret to my stepfather, who had just joined us. To cover mother's excitement, I at once launched into a description of Medicine Rock.

"Why don't you let the boys drive you out to see it?" my stepfather unexpectedly suggested to mother.

"Yes, do come!" James urged hastily. "We know the way."

"I'll be busy for an hour or so," my stepfather said. "James better drive you out, I guess; Don and I will have a look about town," he surprised me by adding. Just why he wanted me to accompany him, I did not know; if indeed, he had any purpose in keeping me with him.

Walking up the only street of which the town boasted, we were accosted by every one we met. Alexander Frayden had acquired a prestige in the county that he little deserved. His commanding figure, for one thing, was very noticeable upon the street of a small village; added to this was his dress of the eastern gentleman of leisure, which he always affected when in public; a dress entirely out of place in a new country like this.

"Why, how do you do, Captain!"

Turning, we saw hastily crossing the street as though to meet us, a man dressed in the primitive costume of the plains. Swarthy, with black hair and dark eyes, he might have passed for a half-breed Indian, had it not been for the look of keen intelligence that lighted up his countenance.

"Hello, La Dusk!" answered my stepfather. "This is my stepson, Donald Deen; and this, Don, is Mr. La Dusk, one of our leading citizens."

"Thank you, Captain," the man replied, bowing gracefully. "Have you seen Judge Homer, or the Colonel?"

"No, I was on my way to look you all up. Manfred said you wanted me to come over."

"Yes; here comes the Judge, now," La Dusk answered.

Approaching us was a little old man, walking with his eyes upon the ground and his face almost buried in his chest as though lost in meditation. Every minute or two he would raise his head long enough to spit out a mouthful of tobacco juice.

"Judge, you know Captain Frayden, don't you?" inquired La Dusk, as we met the stranger.

"You bet I do. Howdy, Captain! Seen the Colonel?"

"No," answered Alexander Frayden. "I was just looking for him."

"Let's walk down to his house," La Dusk suggested.

Turning off from the street, we soon were following a road through the brush. In a few minutes we came to the ranch house where resided Colonel Hampton. He was sitting on the veranda of the long, rambling log house. As he saw us approach, he rose to welcome us.

"Colonel Hampton, allow me to introduce to you Captain Frayden from the northern part of the county," La Dusk said.

"Glad to meet you, Captain," the Colonel answered. "What was your command?"

"My company was with the Army of the Potomac," my stepfather responded.

"Indeed," the Colonel replied. "I, myself, fought in the East — but on the losing side," he added with a sigh.

"Well, let's get to business," spoke up the Judge, as if to ward off the possible reminiscences of two old soldiers.

"It's this way, Captain Frayden," La Dusk began. "Farmer City wants the county seat; Center Town is determined to have it. You know all the arguments put up by both towns. We want your help in your township. This fellow they call 'Sacred Jones,' is it? No, that's not it, either —"

"Holy Ghost Jones," I suddenly piped up.

"Boys should be seen and not heard," my stepfather reproved.

"Well, this man Jones goes all over the county and he has a lot of influence with many of the settlers. You're in strong with him, I understand," continued La Dusk. "Now, if you could swing him for Farmer City, between you both, you might bring over your township."

"I don't know Brother Jones's preference," answered my stepfather.

"Neither do we, but that is up to you."

"But — but Center Town is nearer to our township than is Farmer City," Alexander Frayden replied.

"If you can swing your township, we can promise that you will be appointed register of deeds," La Dusk said.

"How can you promise that?" my stepfather asked.

"The Judge, the Colonel here, and I expect to be appointed by the Governor to be the first county commissioners, and we shall have the legal right to appoint all the county officers, and they will hold their offices until the first general election," La Dusk answered. "And we shall locate the county seat. It will be your work to get signatures to a petition asking the Governor to appoint us, see?"

After considerable arguing among the four, although Colonel Hampton took little part in it, the arrangement was finally made that my stepfather should champion the cause of Farmer City. During the conversation, I was playing with the Colonel's dog on the veranda, assuming an indifference to the discussion which I did not feel. It was evident that my stepfather had entered into a plot to defraud a great part of our county. Center Town was, as its name indicated, almost in the exact geographical center of the county, while Farmer City was on its extreme western border, a distance of forty miles from the eastern line of the county.

Tired of listening to the conversation and having learned all I wanted to know at the time, — besides being very much worried by what I had heard, — I suggested to my stepfather that I go to meet mother. By the time I reached the hotel, mother and James had returned. I could see from her countenance that she had been considerably heartened by the visit with William.

"I think that he will be better off than if he had stayed on the farm," was her only comment to me.

By noon, the little town was full of settlers from the surrounding country. A stand had been erected upon the village green and speeches in the interest of Farmer City for the county seat were soon in progress. La Dusk, Colonel Hampton, and Judge Homer were among the principal speakers, and even my stepfather was prevailed upon to make a speech. I knew that he could have no pronounced convictions in favor of Farmer City, but La Dusk and Judge Homer evidently knew my stepfather's failing — his love of being heard in public.

Alexander Frayden was a natural-born orator and, after playing up the beauties and advantages and prospects of the country at large, he found himself arguing in behalf of Farmer City. Almost without knowing it, he publicly committed himself to the cause of Farmer City; and I understood fully what La Dusk meant when I overheard him whisper to Judge Homer, "We've got him now."

I told mother of the dog that I had been given.

"Do you think he will let me keep him?" I suddenly asked, with fear at the thought that had just come to me.

"Why — I don't know, Donald. I see no reason why you shouldn't have the dog," mother replied.

I was much relieved to have this assurance.

The next day, we started for home. James and I purposely allowed our parents to ride on ahead in the buggy, so that my stepfather should not discover our dog in time to drive him back to Farmer City, in case he would not allow us to keep him. We had gone several miles before the presence of Shep was noticed.

"What are you boys doing with that dog?" he called back to us in forbidding tones.

"Manfred gave him to us," James answered.

Stopping the buggy, my stepfather bade us ride up beside him.

"Why didn't you ask my consent before you accepted the cur?" he said.

"He's not a cur!" I indignantly interposed. "Any one can see he's a fine dog!"

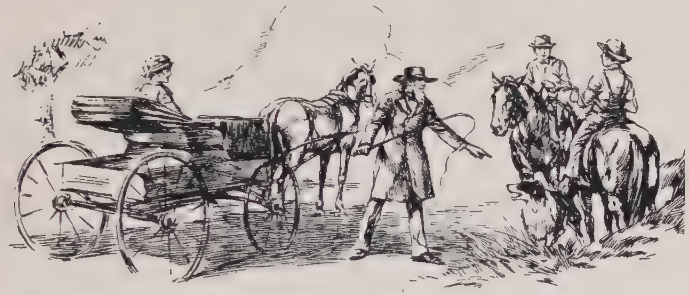
"Send him back!" commanded my stepfather.

"Let the boys have him, Alexander," my mother pleaded.

"Yes, please let us keep him," I urged.

Evidently annoyed by the opposition, my stepfather again shouted at us: "Send him back, I say!"

James and I, not knowing what to do, held our ponies



"Jumping from the buggy, with whip in hand, Frayden ran toward Shep."

in check, but made no move to obey. Jumping from the buggy, with whip in hand, Alexander Frayden ran toward Shep, and as he neared the dog he slashed at the surprised animal with the buggy-whip.

The poor dog, too friendly to understand such venom in human nature, with wagging tail, already had run toward the infuriated man before he discovered my stepfather's intent. Before the dog could dodge, the cruel whip cut him sharply. With a cry of pain, the frightened animal crouched in the road in a seeming effort to efface itself from my stepfather's further notice.

"Shame!" shrieked my mother.

Thoroughly indignant, I suddenly spurred my pony on and dashed between my angry stepfather and the poor dog.

"Call him, James!" I yelled.

Recognizing James's voice, the cowed dog instantly obeyed, running with its tail beneath its legs in abject fear. Putting the spur to my pony, I dashed ahead and soon we were both galloping down the road with the dog at our heels, deaf to the enraged commands hurled after us.

We arrived home at least an hour ahead of my mother and stepfather. We hid Shep in a dry well-hole near the barn. The attempt to dig the well had been abandoned at a depth of eight feet. We carried hay and dropped it down the well-hole and then carefully lowered Shep, leaving him there with some bones to gnaw.

The dog seemed to understand our purpose in subjecting him to this unusual treatment. Without a whimper, he obeyed our commands. Leaving the well-hole, we awaited the coming of Alexander Frayden with fear in our hearts.

Mother evidently had succeeded in placating him, for he made no mention of the dog or of the scene we had had on the road.

The next day, we ventured to set Shep at liberty. My stepfather saw the dog running at large, but made no comment. Running around the barn in search of James, who was playing hide-and-seek with the dog, Shep inadvertently collided with his enemy. With a swift movement, my stepfather lifted his foot and kicked at the dog, but losing his balance, he slid to the ground. With my hand over my mouth, I ran around the haystack for fear my stepfather should hear me laugh at his predicament. The incident passed without further trouble; but from this time on my stepfather took every occasion to kick or strike the dog if it came near him, so that, between my growing love for the faithful animal and my anxiety to protect him from my stepfather's blows, I was in a tumult of constant fear.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE GREAT HEAT

It was the last of June. All during the spring and early summer, the country had been as beautiful as a rare landscape painting. The green of the prairie grass, set off by the pink of an occasional clump of wild roses or by a shaft of bluebells, made a splendid contrast to the billowy white clouds lazily drifting in a sapphire sky. We hunted for the buffalo-pea hidden in the prairie grass, a wistaria-colored, grape-like pod which the settlers sometimes cooked in lieu of fresh vegetables. Along the roadside, yellow-petalled, brown-eyed Susans waved a welcome to the passerby; while around the occasional patches of alkali soil, grew the gaudily colored cacti.

Fields of wonderfully green flax, topped with the most delicate of blue blossoms, waved in the summer zephyrs, opposite acres of promising wheat, now in the milk. Surely, a country of charm and beauty; but the practical settler rejoiced merely in nature's promise of an abundant harvest. Not a farmer in the county who did not congratulate himself upon the foresight that had caused him to move to this goodly land. It was a most hopeful prospect that presented itself to the family at Frayden's Folly, on the last day of June in the second summer of our new life in Dakota Territory.

The first day of July dawned bright and hot. Every hour the day grew hotter. Not a tree to extend its welcome shade. Not a house, nor even a hill, to break the interminable spaces. The heat fairly rose from the ground in dimly perceptible, gaseous clouds.

On Fourth of July morning we were up unusually early, not to celebrate the day, but in order to get through with the bulk of the work before the heat became more intense. With the rising of the sun came a wind from the south that steadily increased in velocity. The dirt from the roads and from the fallow fields rose in great clouds that at times obscured the yet low-hanging sun. One could face the now scorching-hot wind for only a few minutes at a time. Twenty, thirty, and even forty miles an hour it blew, as the mercury mounted to ninety and then to a hundred and finally to a hundred and ten degrees. The beautiful, wax-like flowers of the flax hung their heads in abject exhaustion, while the promising green wheat, which on the previous day had stood knee-high, now was wilted and flat upon the sod, burned as black as the earth that had given it birth.

Acres and acres of grain lay ruined. A year of toil gone for naught! In one short hour, a blight had settled upon the country that had held out so many promises. It was like the mirage of the desert that lures the thirsty traveler on, only to mock at his misery in the end.

We watched the withering of our crops in silent fear. My stepfather turned from the fields, whither he had gone to estimate the ruin, and wearily made his way to the house.

"The Lord's will be done," I heard my mother sigh.

"Oh, for a drink of fresh, cold water," Aunt Mary said, fanning herself with an apron. "Why did I ever come to this terrible country?"

The only drinking water we had stood in barrels in the sun. It was almost boiling hot. There seemed no relief from the stifling, scorching heat. The tall frame structure, so well named "Frayden's Folly," quivered and rocked in the wind. A half-formed stack of hay, piled near the barn, blew in all directions; and only by loading it down with timbers, pieces of farm machinery, broken sod, or whatever of weight we could find about the barnyard, could we save it from the gale.

It was impossible to work in the wind and the heat. The ruined crops cast a gloom over the family that would not be lifted. In the midst of our depression, we heard Holy Ghost Jones, singing at the top of his voice as though in competition with the wind. A moment later he was at the door.

"Howdy, Don! Fine day! Brother Frayden to home?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, as I led the way into the house.

The presence of the peripatetic preacher somewhat revived my stepfather's spirits.

"'Tis the Lord's will, Brother Frayden. 'The Lord gave and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' He moves in a mysterious way, brother, and we cannot fathom His motives."

I wanted to ask the preacher a question which his explanation put into my mind, but I was afraid to do so.

"You boys run on. Brother Jones wants to talk with me confidentially," my stepfather said. I had some idea as to what the confidential talk would be about, so I suggested to James that we go upstairs. There I told him of the conversation between his father and the Farmer City politicians, and what I suspected.

"If we go into the girls' room, we can hear what they say," James suggested.

I had had the same idea but had not liked to admit that I was willing to act the part of an eavesdropper; and yet, I felt that we were justified, suspecting as I did that the plot my stepfather was hatching was neither to his credit nor to that of his family. The flooring of the rooms upstairs consisted of loosely laid boards which served as ceilings for the downstairs rooms. Tiptoeing our way, we entered the girls' room and, pushing aside the rag carpet on the floor, we found a place where the cracks permitted us to see all that went on below and to hear every word distinctly.

After commiserating with my stepfather on the ruin of the crops and offering Scriptural comfort, the preacher said something about the necessity for more coöperation in the Lord's vineyard. I knew this meant another contribution.

"Brother Jones, how do you stand on the county seat question?" I heard.

"Why — why, don't know as how I have any convictions on the subject, Brother Frayden," came the wary reply.

"But we are entitled to our convictions and it is our duty to inform ourselves and arrive at some definite opinion regarding all public questions. We cannot be lukewarm on such subjects."

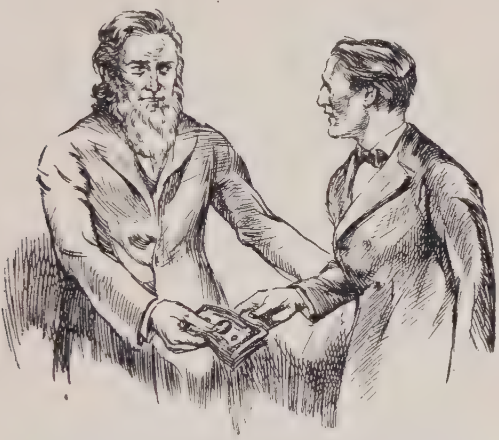
"Yes, but why do you ask the question, Brother Frayden? You know I have no property interests here. My parishioners live in all parts of the county. Some of them are ardent partisans of Farmer City; others are as active for Center Town. Why should I take sides?"

"It is your duty to guide your flock according to the dictates of your conscience, and if you have made up your mind that one town is better situated than the other for the county seat, you would not be doing right if you did not announce your decision to your parishioners."

"There is something in that, Brother Frayden. But tell me, do you think there can be any question but that Center Town will be the choice of the people? It's the geographical center of the county; every one would be equally served by locating the county seat there."

A long argument then took place between the two, my stepfather pleading for Farmer City.

"Center Town is an ungodly village," he said. "The people, like those of Sodom and Gomorrah, will not listen to the voice of the Lord. On the other hand, the pious men of Farmer City are in sympathy with our — your — efforts to minister to the needs of the people. In fact, Mr. La Dusk, Colonel Hampton, and Judge Homer made up a purse which they wished me to present to you for the Lord's work. Here it is, Brother Jones," he continued, as he drew a roll of bills from his pocket and handed it to the evangelist. "Just one hundred dollars."



"'Here it is, Brother Jones,' he continued."

"How generous!" exclaimed the preacher, in real astonishment. "Truly there are many righteous men left. What you said, Brother Frayden, about the ungodliness of Center Town is true."

"Then you could not conscientiously work against a city that proclaims itself the champion of the Lord's annointed," triumphantly exclaimed my stepfather. "I have made up my mind; and having set my hand to the plow, I will not turn back; so far as I am concerned, I shall do my utmost for Farmer City. I was assured by several other citizens of the town that if we erected a meetinghouse in our township, they would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the house of the Lord."

"You don't say!" excitedly replied the preacher. And well he might be excited, for he had hoped for a long time to erect a church building in our township.

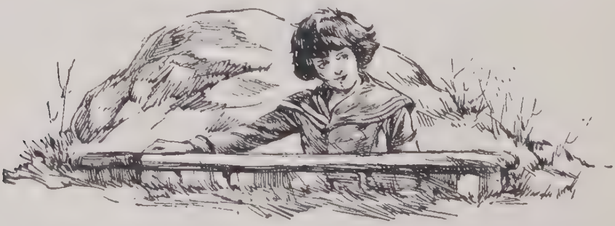
"Yes, I mean every word of it; and what is more, here is fifty dollars of my own money to go with the hundred sent you from Farmer City. You can see how much in earnest I am in this matter," continued my stepfather.

And so the pact was sealed!

"Can't you send over for Brother Rounds?" suggested the preacher.

"A good idea! I will call the boys. James! Don!" shouted my stepfather, opening the outer door.

Hurrying downstairs, we soon received his command to ride over to Neighbor Rounds and have him come back with us. I suggested to James that I go alone, that it was not necessary for both of us to take the message. Soon I was on my way, buffeting the wind and sweltering in the heat.



"I heard Violet calling from the door of the cyclone cellar."

Ever since overhearing the conversation between my stepfather and the Farmer City politicians, I had been greatly disturbed. Any attempt on the part of Alexander Frayden to betray the interests of the township in which we lived might indeed precipitate even worse troubles than I could imagine, as my stepfather's presumptuous ways already had irritated many of the settlers. His attempt to do things on a large scale had excited the jealousy and ridicule of many of the farmers. Critical eyes were watching everything that went on at Frayden's Folly. With such a feeling rampant against him, any effort on my stepfather's part to influence the settlers against their own good would be sure to anger them. It was with these thoughts in mind that I had suddenly decided to seek the advice of the girl whose father I was to call into the plot.

Samuel Rounds met me as I rode into his yard. Having delivered my message, I soon saw him astride of a broncho and on the road to Frayden's Folly.

I had stopped to water my pony and to have a drink myself, when I heard Violet calling from the door of the cyclone cellar, where she had taken refuge from the terrific heat.

"Hello, Don!" she called. "What are you doing out on such a hot day?"

"Let's get in the shade of the house, Vi," I answered as she came up from the cellar.

Violet Rounds was a girl who could not fail to attract an adventurous boy fond of outdoor sports but, not being adventurous myself, I since have sometimes wondered how it was possible for us to find enough interests in common to establish the real friendship that later developed between us.

"What's on your mind, Don?" she asked, as I walked my pony to the north side of the house, where we could escape the direct rays of the maddened sun.

"My stepfather, of course!"

"What's he been doing now?"

Briefly I repeated to her what I had overheard at Farmer City.

"Seems to me you take too much on your own shoulders, Don. You can't help what your stepfather does; you are not responsible for it, and no one is going to blame the family for his misdeeds. Folks are beginning to size him up and they feel sorry for your mother and the others."

"Think I want their pity?" I retorted.

"Of course not, but don't make things out worse than they are. Don't go up in the air, as you always do the moment anything unusual happens."

"I didn't come here for that kind of advice," was my sulky reply.

"Maybe you need it. I don't know but you have as much family pride as your stepfather exhibits. Take care, — pride goeth before a fall, you know. But what can we do about this county seat business?"

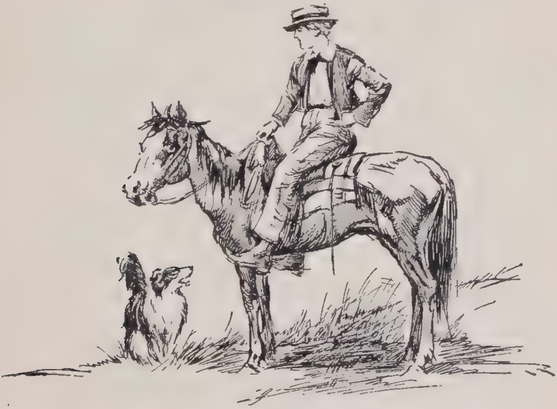
"I don't know; that's what I came to see you about. Can't you get your mother and the boys to influence your father?"

"Perhaps, but if father makes up his mind to a thing, no one can change him. I don't see that we can do anything, Don, unless it is to let the young folks of the neighborhood know all about it; but that, in the long run, will only make it harder for your family. It won't take the neighbors long to put their heads together and to see that if Alexander Frayden and Parson Jones and father are all working for Farmer City, there must be some reason for it. Why, there isn't a man in the township who would vote against Center Town unless he was influenced in some way. I don't think you have anything to worry about, Don."

Her reasoning appeared sound to me, and with her promise to let me know if she learned anything important from her father, I mounted my pony and started home.

Fortunately, the gale was now at my back. Clouds of dust whirled across the plowed fields. Great patches of blackened grain bordered each side of the road. The sun poured its pitiless rays upon me, while my dog dejectedly followed, his tongue lolling from his mouth and his eyes dull and indifferent to the occasional gophers that dashed across our path.

Shep and I had had many an intimate conversation since he had come to live at Frayden's Folly. In fact, aside from Violet, he was the only sympathetic listener I had, and I seemed to read in his eyes, or in the wagging of his tail, or in the attitude of his body, the answers to the questions I asked. He was my Ouija board, in that I had to do all the questioning.



"Shep and I had had many an intimate conversation."

"Shep," I called, as I tarried a moment, "do you think Vi was right in saying we shouldn't worry about it?"

Looking up at me, the dog gave a sharp bark that I interpreted as, "Yes."

Asking a dozen foolish questions, which Shep seemed to answer to my satisfaction, I rode home, eager to know what might be taking place at Frayden's Folly.

James met me as I rode into the barnyard.

"When Rounds got here, I went back upstairs," he said. "I heard everything. Seems dad wanted to get him to work for Farmer City, but he didn't want to do it. 'Didn't I come to your rescue more than once when you needed money?' dad asked. 'Yes, you did, Brother Frayden, but that's no cause for me to sell my vote and my influence,' Rounds answered. Then they brought up the argument that Farmer City was goin' to help build a church, and that the town folks had subscribed to the work of the 'Lord's vineyard.' Dad urged and urged and Rounds argued, but finally dad made him understand that if he expected any more help from him, he'd have to help the cause. 'What are you going to do now, with the grain burned black in your fields?' dad asked. 'Goin' to pay your obligations to me this fall, I suppose?' Finally, Rounds gave in, and now the three of them are plotting how they can bring in the neighbors on the scheme," James concluded.

This, then, was the plot. My stepfather had sold himself for a mess of pottage in the form of a county office. The judgment of youth is cruel, and it seemed to me that Preacher Jones had bartered his soul for contributions ostensibly made to the Lord; but trying to gauge this strange man through the spectacles of after years, I have come to the conclusion that the degree of his fanaticism was such that he honestly was unable to recognize where self-interest left off and where the work in which he was engaged began. Unconsciously, perhaps, he allowed himself to be used by his wily associates; and yet, like our forefathers who hanged the witches at Salem, he undoubtedly justified his actions by thinking that he was rendering his God a service thereby. If, perchance, he derived some personal benefit from his questionable conduct, it probably did not stretch his imagination to consider the benefit as a reward of the righteous.

With Rounds the case was different. He had openly traded his vote and influence in payment of his financial obligations to my stepfather. Yet strange to say, all three of them attributed their action to their desire to "till the Lord's vineyard."

"And now, shall we have a word of prayer, before we depart?" we overheard Brother Jones say, as we entered the house. Disgusted, we boys took to the barn and the company of the self-respecting cattle, who entertained no delusions regarding their duties.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MY FIRST VENTURE

ONCE more the wheat made an effort to show its green stalks above the sod, but the setback it had received from the hot wind could not be entirely overcome. Only the fact that it had been well stooled during the late spring made it possible for it again to shoot up from its roots. Seven or eight bushels to the acre probably would be the extent of the yield.

The oats had not suffered so severely as the other grains and the corn gave promise of a fair return. By the time harvest approached, we were encouraged to estimate the prospective returns, with the exception of the wheat, as only a little below the average. The yellow fields of ripened grain made a beautiful picture, and we were impatient to try out the new self-binder my stepfather had bought.

After much labor, and with the assistance of an expert from Center Town, we at last succeeded in setting up the machine with its many intricate parts. A number of the neighbors had driven over to see the binder, and some were planning to come the following Monday to watch it work.

Sunday dawned unusually hot and oppressive. The family had just returned from service, held in Samuel Rounds' sod house, when the clouds in the sky suddenly grew green and ominous. A heavy wind swept down from the north. Slowly the now murky clouds fought their way in the teeth of the wind, their copper-colored edges threatening the hail so much dreaded by the settlers. Realizing the necessity for haste, I helped my stepfather unhitch the team. Indeed, I barely had time to unharness and stable them before the rain came down in sheets, and with it the greatly feared hail.

By the time I reached the house, I was drenched. Soon the ground was white with marbles of ice. The poor cattle in the pasture ran backward and forward in a useless effort to escape the storm. Meanwhile, my stepfather restlessly paced the floor. My mother stood pale as a ghost. Aunt Mary hid her head in a shawl. A tattoo like a thousand rifles beat upon the roof. Suddenly, a crash of thunder rocked the house on its foundation, while a blinding flash of lightning filled the room. And then James beckoned us to the window, and what we saw filled us with dismay.

Looking out, we saw that the hail was cutting off the heads of the ripened wheat as though the blade of a reaper were at work, the stalks being pounded into the ground by the very force of the storm. The hopes which had revived after the recovery of the grain from the blast of the hot wind, once more were crushed as pitilessly as the wheat itself. There was no gathering of neighbors the following day to see the working of the new binder. Little, indeed, was left to harvest. A few acres of oats and flax, with the corn and a small patch of potatoes, were all that remained to show for the season's work.

Gloom settled down upon the household, my stepfather's discouragement reacting sharply upon the family. Evidently, it took more faith than he possessed to be reconciled by Biblical texts pertaining to the "Lord's will." If my mother thought of it, she surely did not dare to quote the one to the effect that whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.

We had not been singled out as the sole victims of the storm, however. The crops of nearly every farmer in the township had been wiped out by the devastating hail.

This disaster to the crops left little work to do on the farms until the time for fall plowing, and I began to plan to make use of my time. There had been talk of starting a school in the township, but so far nothing had come of it. With all there was to do during the first two seasons in this practically unknown and untried country, the settlers could give little attention to public questions. The first political problem that presented itself was the appointment of the county officials and the location of the county seat. The establishment of a school had been postponed without public discussion, much to my disappointment, as I had begun to recognize that being out of school would prove a serious handicap. Disturbed over the situation, I made up my mind to speak to my stepfather about it without further delay.

"Do you suppose I could go to school this fall?" I asked him.

"It is doubtful if a school will be organized this year, Donald," he answered.

"But if it is organized?" I persisted.

"Time enough to talk about it then," he answered shortly, turning away as if wishing to avoid further discussion.

Not satisfied, I pressed the question again, after the hail had blasted our hopes, only to have my stepfather settle the matter very definitely to his own satisfaction by saying, "Donald, if a school should be organized, which is not probable, there will be no money now to buy either books or clothes. The hail has ruined everything and I do not know where we are to get the money with which to pay our machinery notes."

No money to buy books or clothes, I thought, but plenty to lend to his friends among the settlers! Such bitter thoughts only made me more determined than ever to go to school. Knowing there would be little work to do on the farm for several weeks, I asked my stepfather if I might help some of the other farmers. Perhaps our fortune was so depleted that the feeding of even one extra mouth counted; at any rate, he surprised me by quickly giving his consent.

I had learned that a new preacher, who had moved into the township about four miles west of us, was looking for some one to help in the digging of a well. Taking my stepfather at his word, and fearing to delay even for a few hours lest he change his mind, I set out for the home of the Reverend John Henry Miles to take the job that I knew awaited me.

The Reverend Miles was a man of fair education and somewhat pleasing appearance. He wore long whiskers, black as his Indian-like hair. His kindly brown eyes beamed a welcome to every one, and he soon made friends in the community. He had taken up a homestead to farm that he might supplement the slender pittance received for his work as a home missionary. Already most of the settlers had agreed to help support his efforts to establish union services, as Brother Jones's ministry took him so far afield that it was impossible for him to hold services very often in our neighborhood. This agreement had not been at all to my stepfather's liking, nor to that of Samuel Rounds. A few of the converts that had been made at the revival conducted by Brother Jones during the previous winter, also objected to the activities of the Reverend Miles. No open hostility had been manifested, but the advent of the new minister had caused most of the settlers to take a stand either for or against the cause espoused by my stepfather.

The Reverend Miles suffered from a serious case of absent-mindedness. His first services, announced several weeks before the great hail, were to have been held at the home of one of the settlers. From many miles around the farmers gathered; but no preacher appeared. After the hour for the services long had past, the congregation had dispersed, fearing that the new minister might be ill.

The following morning, as I was driving home with a load of hay, I met the Reverend Miles in his farm wagon, accompanied by his family, which was by no means a small one.

"Well, young man," he called out, "aren't you going to church?"

"To church!" I echoed in amazement. "Why — why — what church? What do you mean?" I stuttered in bewilderment.

"Why, is this not the Sabbath?" he asked somewhat indignantly, evidently surprised that I should be working on the Lord's Day.

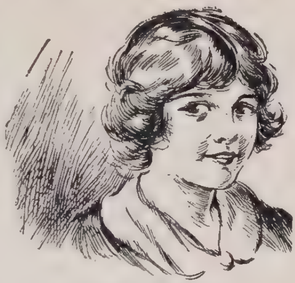
"Sunday?" I exclaimed. "Why, no, this is Monday! We waited an hour for you yesterday. There was a big turn-out, too, and every one was dreadfully disappointed. What was the matter? Were you ill?"

Amazed, not one of the family was able to utter a word. Finally, the minister, much confused, made explanation.

"Why — I — I — thought this was Sunday. Yesterday, I dug in the well from seven in the morning until six at night. Pretty hard to keep track of the days out here; no trains, no papers to remind one of the time," he weakly added. "Say, young man, can't you come over and help me out with the well for a few days?"

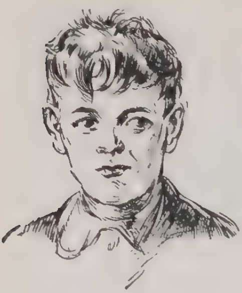
It was this invitation that had given me the courage to seek my stepfather's permission to look for work, and as a result I was soon being initiated into the mysteries of well digging.

I had been working for the Reverend Miles but a few days when there arrived, from the East, a young sister of the minister's wife. I soon found that this girl was going to give me considerable concern.


Maud Warren.

Maud Warren was about my own age, rather plump and pretty, with light blue eyes and flaxen hair and a complexion as fair as that of a viking's daughter. Indeed, she was the antithesis of Violet Rounds, who was a typical brunette. Violet was rather inclined to be thoughtful and sober; Maud was continually smiling, always jolly and happy. I was attracted by Maud Warren's charm; yet, at the same time, I could not help feeling a sense of disloyalty to Violet, who had shared my confidences and who had proved herself my friend.

The young people of the Blue Blanket Valley were like those of any other rural community. The boy who did not have ambition or courage enough to make a five-mile drive across the snow-covered prairies to take some favored girl to a social or prayer-meeting simply did not exist in that country. There was little opportunity for amusement, so the young people sought every chance to be together. Each new boy or girl that came to the township naturally excited an interest, and keen were the rivalries to win the friendship of a newcomer. It was no wonder then that I was quick to be attracted by Maud Warren. But, if the girl had any interest in me, her attitude was puzzling. For the most part, she was indifferent; but sometimes she did unbend and become most gracious. It may have been her girl's way of exciting my interest. Although I was insistent in my boyish efforts to please her, I never could succeed in establishing the same feeling that made Violet and me real friends.



Zeke Rounds.

When I had been working for the Reverend Miles a week, he came home one night, accompanied by Zeke Rounds, Violet's brother.

"Zeke is going to help us with the well," explained the minister, as we all sat down at the supper table.

Observing Zeke's homely, freckled face, his coarse, unkempt hands, and his uncouth manners, I could not imagine a greater contrast between two human beings than that between him and Maud Warren. And yet, strange to say, not a word dropped from Zeke's lips that Maud failed to appreciate. His attempts at wit found a ready response in the girl's frank laughter. She kept his plate heaped throughout the meal, passing first one dish and then another, as if afraid the boy might be in danger of starvation.

Every attempt on my part to elicit a word from her met with only a polite "Yes" or "No," so I soon gave up trying to take part in the conversation. When the next meal and the next were but a repetition of the first, and when the girl made frequent excuses to watch us at our work, I became jealously concerned. To add to my discomfiture, Zeke on every occasion sought to parade my interest in his sister.

"Vi thinks a lot of Don," he said one day, as we were seated about the table.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Maud with sudden interest. "Donald is not the only one who admires Violet," she added.

"Your sister is a very exceptional young lady, Zeke," the minister said.

"Don thinks so, at any rate, don't you, Don?" replied Zeke.

Despite my interest in Maud, I was still a true pal to Violet. "Yes, I do," I retorted. "There's nothing hypocritical about your sister, Zeke."

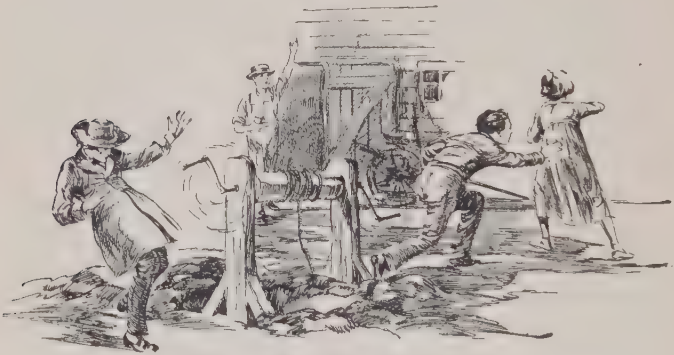
So we sparred day after day, Zeke delighting in his chance to make me miserable. The more he seemed to gain in favor with the object of my silent admiration, the more I seemed to fall in her good graces.

One day, when we were busy at the well, Maud came out to see how the work was progressing. We had been digging through blue clay for thirty feet, and now we were down sixty feet with still no sign of water. The minister's father had taken my place at the bottom of the well. We were then shoring up the side of the well with wooden casings. The casing we had built in sections in the form of large cylinders of the exact circumference of the hole we had dug. These sections, about twelve feet in length, we let down into the well, one at a time.

Just as Maud joined us, we were about to let down a section of casing. For the purpose of adjusting it, the minister's father had gone down into the well, while the minister, Zeke, and I worked above. We had fastened a two-by-four across the top of the casing and had attached the windlass-rope to this.

The weight of the casing was so great that it took the combined strength of the minister and Zeke to hold the rope as it gradually unwound from the windlass and slipped down into the well. The better to aid them, I stood by with a board for each of them to place under the handle of the windlass to relieve them of some of the weight while resting.

Each of them had placed his board under the handles of the windlass while I ran to the barn for a box of grease. As I came back, I noticed Maud in conversation with Zeke. My heart filled with envy as I thought of the strange attraction existing between the two.



"'Look out!' I called."

The wind was blowing from twenty to thirty miles an hour. The Reverend Miles, with hands bearing down upon the windlass, had his back half turned to Maud and Zeke. Evidently his mind was on next Sunday's sermon, for he seemed oblivious of his immediate surroundings. Zeke was holding his handle of the windlass with one hand while with the other he was trying to catch Maud, who teasingly was dodging away from him.

I could hear the windlass creak; I could see the handles give, now one way and now the other. I knew the weight of the casing was too heavy to warrant the slightest inattention on the part of either.

"Look out!" I called; for as Zeke made a lunge to catch the dodging girl, he loosened his hold on the handle and the strong wind swept the board aside. Down it crashed into the well.

The girl screamed, holding her hands to her ears as if to drive out the impending sound of the board when it struck the bottom of the well. Her scream and the sudden tension on the handle of the windlass brought the absent-minded minister to his senses; but the full weight of the casing was too much for the minister and Zeke to hold, and before either of them realized it, the handles of the windlass were torn from their grasp and the minister was thrown to the ground.

Down plunged the heavy section of casing with forty feet to travel, the handles of the windlass revolving with terrific speed. Powerless to do anything, the Reverend Miles slowly picked himself up from the ground, while Maud rent the air with her shrieks. Soon the entire family stood about the well, peering down into its inky depths. Not a sound could be heard from below.

Dazed, the minister seemed powerless to act. Zeke white as snow, his knees knocking together in fright, was indeed a figure to be pitied.

"Can't you — do anything, Donald?" Maud sobbed. The mind works so swiftly that I could not refrain from a feeling of pride to think that this girl who had scorned all my boyish efforts at friendship should now turn to me, instead of to Zeke, for help. Nothing more was needed to spur me to act.

Disengaging the rope from the spent windlass, I soon had another rope fast and wrapped about its cylinder. Attaching a bucket to the end of the rope, I commanded the bewildered minister and the frightened Zeke to let me down into the well.

Maud seemed appalled, but she made no protest at my seeming recklessness. The minister and his wife objected feebly, but sweeping their words aside and cautioning Zeke to see that the rope was unwound slowly, I soon was out of sight of the anxious faces peering down at me as I dropped lower and lower into the darkness of the well. Foot after foot of rope was played out. About halfway down I could distinguish the casing firmly lodged in the sides of the well. The journey downward seemed interminable. I began to wish I had not been so foolhardy. Why had not Zeke offered to make the attempt? Why didn't he take advantage of this opportunity to prove that he was as wonderful as Maud Warren thought him to be? These thoughts flashed through my mind as the darkness enveloped me.

I grew weak with terror at the thought of the earth closing in upon me. Minutes seemed hours. I was drenched with the perspiration of fright. My teeth chattered. I tried to call out to those above to play out the rope more slowly, but the sound of my voice failed to escape beyond my lips.

While I guided myself as best I could, the bucket in which I was standing dropped through the casing and, little by little, I made my way toward the bottom of the well. It was apparent that the casing could not dislodge itself and that I was safe at least from that danger. Looking up as I approached the bottom, although it was not later than noon, I could see both the stars and the unclouded sun.

Regaining my voice with my courage, I warned those above to check my further descent. I looked below me. The old man lay huddled on the bottom of the well, the fallen board lying almost horizontally across the well, the edges jammed into the earthen sides, one end resting just above his head. I soon loosened the board. Examining the silent form, I was satisfied that he had not been seriously injured, but that fright and weakness, combined with a superficial wound on the head, had caused him to faint. My surmise was correct and, in a few moments, I heard him groan.

I called out the joyful news to the anxious group above. Climbing out of the bucket, I stood at the bottom of the well. Detaching the rope from the bucket, I cut off a length and then retied the bucket to the main piece. Finally, with much effort, I had the old man astride the bucket and tied tightly to the rope. When I gave the word, Zeke and the minister slowly hauled up the inert burden. I was overjoyed as I saw them lift the old man gently over the top of the well-curbing.

The bucket soon was down again, and it was not many minutes before I, too, was clambering out into the sunlight. The appreciative smile which Maud Warren gave me, I accepted at its full value. There was a look in her eye that I had not seen before, but I dared not venture to guess its meaning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHEP HELPS ME GET RELIGION

WITHIN a few short weeks, my sojourn at the home of the Reverend Miles ended. Water finally had been found. The old man whose life I had saved urged me to work for him on his farm. He could not sufficiently express the gratitude he felt, and it was with the greatest reluctance that he let me out of his sight during the few remaining days I spent with him.

From this experience I gained a new attitude toward religion and a mass of facts pertaining to the church in general. During our work on the well, the Reverend Miles gave me many new ideas to ponder over. He taught me that religion should be a joy, — something to make life more tolerable and pleasant, and not a state of mind to be endured. He pointed out the overemphasis often placed upon the sufferings and death of our Lord and the little regard paid to His life and His teachings.

"Why, He came to show us the way," the minister said one day. "He didn't come merely to reconcile us to the grave by offering us a future existence. If we really believe in Him and follow His teachings, we shall find that sin and sickness and poverty are unnecessary. His mission was to teach us how to live, not how to die."

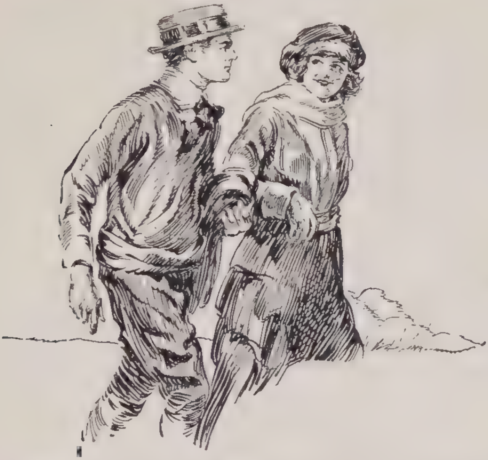
Long I pondered over these and other truths he taught me. I can thank this sincere home missionary for many things.

As I bade the minister's family goodby, Maud said, "I'm going to walk a little way with Don."

Too much surprised to say anything, I left the family and started on my way home. For several moments not a word was spoken, for I was somewhat intimidated by the initiative Maud had taken in seeking this opportunity of being alone with me.

"Are you glad to go home, Don?" she finally asked.

"I'll be glad to see the folks, of course," I replied.



"'I'm going to walk a little way with Don,' Maud said."

"I — I wanted to tell you how much I — admired your courage," she faltered.

"Thank you," I answered, "but it was not courage."

"What was it, then?"

"I don't know. Just the next thing that had to be done, and I seemed to be the one to do it. I never gave it a thought. Something drove me on and, before I knew it, I was down the well. Probably, had I stopped to think, or realized the danger, I wouldn't have done it," I replied. "I was frightened enough after I got started."

"And you don't call that courage? Why, the very fact that you acted without counting the cost shows your courage. Only cowards stop to weigh dangers before they act. You must have the right stuff in you, Don, or you wouldn't do such things."

I looked at her in amazement and thought, I, a hero? It seemed so utterly absurd and so inconsistent with my own idea of myself that I could not help laughing.

"You don't need to laugh, Donald Deen! It's all true; every word of it, and I'm proud to have you for a friend. I'm sorry I've been so mean to you," she added.

I had no words with which to reply, so I said goodby. At last I had been able to establish myself in her good graces, I thought, as with boyish perversity my mind reverted to Zeke Rounds.

I returned to Frayden's Folly with money enough to buy a new suit of clothes and such books as I might need for the winter term of school, if one was organized.

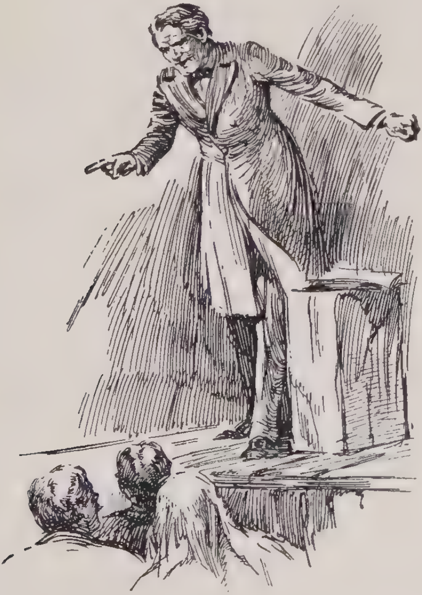
At home I found Parson Jones and Samuel Rounds in close conference with my stepfather. They were planning for another revival, my mother informed me. I dreaded the thought of it.

For reasons which I then did not understand, but which I later learned, they were anxious to hold a series of meetings before the farmers became busy with their threshing and fall plowing.

The Reverend Miles had been making inroads upon the good graces of the settlers, and it was feared that an attempt on his part to organize a regular church would interfere with the following Brother Jones had been enjoying since the advent of the first settlers in the Blue Blanket Valley. It was for this reason that my stepfather was opposed to a winter term of school. In order to start a school it would be necessary to have a schoolhouse, and a schoolhouse would offer a place of worship for any congregation that the Reverend Miles might succeed in organizing. With the hope, then, of rounding up every straggler that might be induced to enlist under the banner of Brother Jones, the coming revival was advertised throughout the entire county.

In due time, the revival began. A large tent had been erected as near the center of the township as possible, and several smaller tents were grouped around it for the convenience and comfort of those in attendance.

Night after night, from all directions, came the settlers after a hard day in the field or about the farm. Most of them had not less than four miles to drive each way, but that was a short trip in this country of vast distances. We drove over in a lumber wagon, picking up as many on



"Parson Jones was a typical wayside evangelist."

the way as the wagon would hold. The cool evening air played through the short prairie grasses. The stars fairly deluged the country with their effulgence. The older folks quietly exchanged the customary small talk of the neighborhood, while we youngsters laughed and sang to our heart's content. The return home, however, found us all subdued, still laboring under the emotional stress of the meeting.

Parson Jones was a typical wayside evangelist; a little more crude, perhaps, but as eloquent as any Peter Cartwright, and, maybe, as forceful and as successful. The man really was remarkable in many ways. Tall, lean, and lank, with long arms like those of a giant scarecrow, he projected himself from his crude platform, reaching out to his audience as if to pluck out now this sinner, now that, from the danger that he pictured as threatening. His long, bushy hair fell disheveled over his shoulders, forming a dark frame for the pallor of his ghostly countenance, out of which shone a pair of coal-black eyes.

It made little difference to Parson Jones how he mixed his metaphors. Logic was something with which he had no concern. His strategy lay in breaking down the reserve with which each mind seeks to protect the sacred things of the soul.

The man had an uncanny way of making his remarks seem personal to each member of his congregation, and when he leaned forward with his arm extended over the pulpit and his forefinger pointed over the heads of the congregation, I just knew he was singling me out as an example of an unregenerate sinner. I did not know exactly what sin I had committed, but I felt that I must have broken every law of God and man, so forcible were the exhorter's suggestions. Was it any wonder that a supersensitive boy should be shaken by the storm that swept strong men from their feet?

The earnestness of the man gripped his audience with a hold that could not be loosened. Men, women, and children sat in their seats completely under his hypnotic power. He had shaken us and struck us and beaten and pounded us, mentally, until our minds were like clay in his hands. The audience sobbed. Some cried aloud. Weak women shrieked, jumped from the benches, whirled themselves round and round until they fell on the ground in a cataleptic condition. Strong men grasped at their throats as though choking; others shook as though overtaken by a chill. With some, the tears quietly rolled down hardened, leather-like faces, while still others fled from their seats to the mourner's bench, or to the penitent's rail.

By this time the preacher was at his best. There was no organ or trained choir to supplement his efforts. Violet Rounds had been enlisted to lead the singing. She had a voice of more than ordinary sweetness and, although untrained, it possessed a quality that seemed to awaken the latent emotions of even those who never had been known to express emotion. Sam Coleman, a bachelor who was holding down a claim in the neighborhood, had been prevailed upon to play the violin, although there was much argument against the use of this devil's instrument in the house of the Lord.

Suddenly, and yet quietly, the wailing of the violin brought home to every one of the audience the appealing words of "Almost Persuaded." Brother Jones continued his pleadings, now in a quiet, conversational tone, now suddenly raising his voice in a crescendo that struck terror into every heart.

Those who had not responded to the preacher's appeal were now writhing and shivering and squirming on the hard benches. The strange environment in which we were placed, the lonely tent, lighted only by kerosene lamps, surrounded by the blackened night and the mystery of the ancient prairies; a few handfuls of God's creatures, surrounded by conditions that tried men's souls to the limit; the total absence of God from the lives of many; the unexpressed hunger for Him on the part of others; the fear of Him that had lain dormant since childhood in the breasts of some and that now was being resurrected under the skillful suggestion of this magnetic exhorter — this was all that was required to stage the primitive emotional cataclysm now exhibited.

I had seen Violet Rounds looking at me as though she, too, were in league with the preacher. Her eyes now pleading and suffused with tears, now commanding and impelling, seemed to draw me off the bench to which I clung with both hands as if I would not be dragged forward against my will. And then, never taking her eyes from mine, she began to sing softly. Now I found myself stumbling up the improvised aisle, with Shep at my heels, and before I knew it, I was kneeling at the penitent's rail, driven in abject fear publicly to confess the sins I never had committed, and to experience the strange ecstasy that some call conversion.

As I knelt at the railing, shaking with sobs I could neither understand nor suppress, I heard the liquid voice of Violet Rounds singing, as it seemed, especially for me, "Peace, peace, the wonderful peace of God's love"; then I felt Shep's rough tongue licking my tear-wet face, and at once I gained control of my emotions; all fear was driven from my heart. An ineffable sense of a gift bestowed stole over me; a peace that can come only from the knowledge that God is Love.

He who loves but a dog,
By that love, nearer comes to God.

These words flashed through my mind. If Parson Jones had frightened me into getting religion, it was Shep that made me understand the meaning of true religion.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I FALL FROM GRACE

For a number of days following the revival, I seemed to be walking on air. An indescribable sense of peace filled my heart. The glory of the country never was so resplendent. Even my stepfather became endowed with spiritual qualities I never before had discovered; I began to upbraid myself for an unchristian-like attitude toward him. The words of Scripture that I daily read took on new meanings. I felt a keen delight in my religious duties that formerly had been absent from their performance. And then, there came a time when my spiritual vision was dimmed and I seemed to feel myself slipping backward.

Jacob never wrestled more insistently with his angel than did I with the sense of an evil presence which threatened to drag me into a slough of despond. Finally, I neglected my prayers. I ceased to read the Bible and I came to dread the ordeal of family devotions. I was, in fact, most miserable.

It was in this state of mind that I found myself roaming the prairies one day, in search of the intangible something I had lost. In the revulsion of feeling that I was experiencing, everything was jaundiced to my disordered senses. A gopher darted across my path, and, in sudden wrath, I hurled a stick at it. I had not hitherto been able to kill one of these little pests. Taking life, even the life of an insignificant gopher, always had been a terrible thing to me and now, without reason and in a fit of anger, I had destroyed one of God's creatures. So intent was I in gazing down upon the little dead squirrel that I did not notice the approach of Violet Rounds.

She startled me as she drew rein, and this caused the anger in my heart to flame anew, — anger with myself for killing the innocent gopher; anger for being surprised by the girl's sudden appearance, and resentment at the part she had played in bringing me to my knees in the tent.

Ever since the revival, I had avoided her and she had made no effort to seek me out. She knew how I felt about taking life, and she often had laughed at my refusal to destroy the gophers that had become a pest to the settlers.

Sliding from her pony, she stooped down and picked up the dead gopher by the tail and, with quizzical eyes, looked at me as she awaited an answer to her unspoken question.

"Well! What about it?" I asked boorishly.

"Is it as bad as all that, Don?" she replied.

"Quit talking in riddles. What do you mean?" I answered.

"I think I will keep this to remind me of the time when Donald Deen began to think for himself."

With a quick movement she whirled the gopher over her head and suddenly released it; its little body flew into the prairie grass, leaving in her fingers the tiny tail devoid of its bony appendage.

"To remind you of what a fool you made of me," I retorted.

"A girl may discover a fool; she can't make one."

She must have seen a surprised look of pain flash across my face, for she hastened to add, "I am sorry, Don; I did not mean it that way. Tell me what's the trouble, won't you? Why did you kill the gopher? Why are you angry at me?"

"Supposing you had discovered I was a fool, why did you want to make me exhibit myself in public?" I answered bitterly.

"You mean at the revival?"

"Yes."

"Did I have anything to do with that?" she asked.

"You know you did," I replied sullenly.

"Then I am glad. But how did I influence you? You knew what you were doing, didn't you?"

I could not tell her that the penetrating music of her voice had broken down the resistance I was exerting against the hypnotism of the exhorter's magnetic threatenings and pleadings. I could not tell her that her tear-suffused eyes looking into my very soul had robbed me of all will power; that my muscles had become weak, and that under the force of her silent appeal, I had loosened my physical hold upon the bench to which I was clinging and had abandoned myself entirely to the weird compelling power of the moment.

"Are you sorry now? You seemed so happy afterwards. Tell me, what has gone wrong, Don?"

"Nothing," I persisted.

"Please, Don."

"I don't believe in such things! No wonder Frayden acts like an angel after a revival and then, in a week or two, becomes as bad as the devil himself."

"Of course, you don't expect that you can stay in the clouds all the time, do you? I don't know much about such things. We have been brought up to believe in revivals and they seem to do a lot of good."

"What did I ever do that I should have to march up before all that crowd and tell them what a dreadful sinner I had been?"

"The Bible says we must be born again, you know. It seems to me that a revival is only a way of making people want to change their manner of living," Violet replied.

"Anyway," I retorted, again feeling belligerent as I thought of the spectacle I had made of myself when on my knees and in tears before this girl and all of the settlers. "I don't want to be a Christian!"

"Why, Donald Deen! You heathen!" she gasped.

"I don't and I won't!" I reiterated in exasperation. "Why should I be sniveling around down in the dumps and then be lost in the clouds? Afraid to do this and afraid to do that for fear of doing the wrong thing! What you think is right, some one else will think is wrong."

Violet Rounds looked at me in amazement. I felt that I wanted to hurt her; to rob her of her self-assurance. The fact that I had been compelled to admit that she was right in every argument in which we had crossed swords, nettled me. If I was a heathen, I would live like one, I thought. As I stepped toward her, I knew that she had anticipated my thought, for the kiss that I had planned to place upon her lips was thwarted by a vigorous slap that left my cheek tingling for half an hour afterward.

"No one can prevent you from being a fool, if you want to be, I suppose," she said with disdain, as she turned and walked toward her pony. She threw the bridle reins back over the horse's neck, placed her two hands upon its back, and with a quick jump was mounted and off across the prairie without another word, without even once glancing backward.

I was utterly disgusted with myself for offending the one friend on whom I knew I could depend. I had sought to lay the blame upon every one but myself. Slowly, I trudged back to Frayden's Folly. Somehow, the stinging blow upon my cheek seemed to restore my mental equilibrium.

"Why should I single myself out from all the rest?" I thought as I walked home. Grown men and women had gone forward to the penitent's rail that night, making no attempt to hide their emotions or their tears. The experience had wrought a decided change in the lives of some of them. Why should I, a mere boy, assume a feeling of shame for having faced this crisis in my life when my elders were openly grateful for the experience?

"*Dear Violet,*" I scribbled that night after retiring to my room, "*I am sorry. Forgive me. Donald Deen.*" Placing the scrap of paper in an envelope, I sealed it and hid it under my pillow. Then I forced myself to my knees and said my prayers.

Although we lived only two miles apart, the note was delivered by way of the Pembroke post office, which was five miles from Frayden's Folly and an equal distance from the home of Violet Rounds. In the course of a week, I received a reply in the same way. Hurrying to the barn, which seemed to be the haven for the expression of all of my emotions, I tremblingly opened the envelope. One sheet of paper and two words were all that greeted my vision. "*Forget it!*" were the words, so characteristic of the girl. When I sought to replace the note in its covering, I found in the bottom of the envelope the gopher tail she had so deftly removed from the innocent victim of my wrath.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE SCHOOL BOARD

As THE result of the revival, there was a temporary increase in Brother Jones's flock. So numerous had been the new conversions that there was much talk of building a church for the elder's congregation. My stepfather shrewdly had launched this idea and, of course, Rounds at once abetted it. Doubtless they would have succeeded in their plan, had it not been for a counter proposition innocently suggested by one of Brother Jones's most parsimonious followers.

"Why not build a schoolhouse at the expense of the township and then we can hold public worship there without its costing anything?" suggested this careful one.

"Public worship" was the phrase that disclosed the danger to Alexander Frayden's plan.

"Don't you see, if we use a public schoolhouse, the new minister will have the same right?" I overheard my stepfather saying to Rounds.

"That must never be!" emphatically answered Samuel Rounds. "I don't like that man's ideas. He's a heretic! Zeke tells me he don't believe in the doctrine of Sanctification, even! Claims that hell fire's a fairy story, that thar ain't no devil, and that the whale never did swallow Jonah!"

"Perhaps we better drop the idea of the church building, for the time being," wisely suggested my stepfather. Indeed, other events loomed up that banished all thought of this plan from the minds of the settlers.

The governor of the Territory had just appointed La Dusk, Judge Homer, and Colonel Hampton as the first county commissioners. Naturally, they at once decided in favor of Farmer City as the location for the county seat. But the decision did Alexander Frayden no good. Their promise to appoint him register of deeds had been contingent upon his ability to secure signers to the petition asking the governor to appoint them county commissioners. With the help of Rounds and, incidentally, Brother Jones, he had made a careful canvass of the township in the interest of these men; but these efforts only had brought down upon the group the wrath of the other settlers, so that they had been compelled to abandon further attempts to influence the farmers. The hard-headed pioneers of the community could not understand why any resident of the township should support the men who were publicly pledged to locate the county seat at the extreme western border of the county, unless his motives were sinister ones.

Needless to say, my stepfather's failure to deliver the township to these politicians caused them to drop him as a possible candidate for any office within their gift. His failure to receive the expected appointment somewhat mitigated the ill-will of the neighbors and, by the time the revival was in progress, all outward evidence of animosity was buried.

The talk of a church building did, however, revive the idea of a winter term of school. The suggestion that a schoolhouse be erected met with constantly increasing approval. In an effort to forestall this project, my stepfather sent for Rounds. No attempt was made to keep the conference from the rest of our family.

My stepfather proposed to Rounds that an attempt be made to block the building of a schoolhouse. While they were discussing the matter, mother listened carefully; Aunt Mary continued with her reading of the *Chicago Weekly Inter-Ocean*, while James and the girls and I played parchesi. I could not keep my mind on the game, so interested was I in the possibility of a winter term of school.

"The township can't stand th' taxation for a schoolhouse," said Rounds. "Next year's plenty time enough to think of it. The children won't suffer, if they do have to wait another year. The crops haven't been good, either."

Strange how many righteous arguments can be devised to bolster up an unrighteous cause!

"What would you suggest, Brother Frayden?" Rounds questioned.

"Well," replied my stepfather, "I think there would be no harm in having an election to choose a board of school trustees."

"How would that help?" asked Rounds.

"The law provides for such a board and sooner or later one will be elected. They will have full charge of school affairs. The initiative in all such matters would rest with them. The fact that an election of a school board was to be held would for the time at least appease those who are clamoring for a schoolhouse."

"But — who'd we 'lect for school trustees?" Rounds inquired.

"Brother Jones, having filed on a claim in the township, is now a legal resident," suggested my stepfather.

"The Lord is guidin' you, Brother Frayden," Rounds declared sententiously.

It always has seemed strange to me that the Lord should guide the many questionable enterprises for which He is given credit.

"And you, Brother Rounds, will be the second member," said my stepfather.

"Providin' you make the third," was the politic reply.

So the new school board was projected at Frayden's Folly; and as it was planned, so in time it was elected. The revival had softened the feeling toward Alexander Frayden; so that when his name was suggested as one of the school trustees, no open opposition was manifested. Since Brother Jones still continued to exert an influence over many of the farmers, no campaign was necessary to gain votes for him; and it was his influence that elected Samuel Rounds. The election of a school board, as my stepfather had anticipated, was interpreted by the settlers as the first step toward building a schoolhouse. Weeks went by, however, with no evidence that the new trustees intended doing any such thing. Every effort on the part of the settlers to bring up the subject was skillfully blocked by the school board. As chairman of the board, Alexander Frayden was bitterly blamed and the old grudge against him once more grew apparent.

Despite all this, he held a strong grip on a number of the more prominent settlers. I now knew that Rounds and Brother Jones were not the only ones to whom he had lent money. A meeting had been called at the home of one of the farmers for the purpose of devising means of compelling the school trustees to make provisions for a schoolhouse. As every one had been invited, my stepfather did not hesitate to attend.

It was Violet Rounds who gave me the report of the proceedings; she had it direct from her father. It seems that much indignation was openly expressed at the attitude of the school trustees; but upon the arrival of Alexander Frayden the fiery criticism cooled somewhat.

My stepfather took no part in the discussions. He listened attentively until the most important farmers had had their say, and then, one by one, he took the more disgruntled settlers aside. Manfred, the old Indian fighter, who had now moved to our neighborhood, was among those called into private conference.

"Why are you so interested in this project, Brother Manfred?" my stepfather asked suavely. "You have no children; it means nothing to you but taxes."

"Don't 'brother' me, Frayden," tartly replied the old scout. "Seein' as how I have no kids of my own, doesn't it 'pear as that's jest how I should take an intrust in other folks's kids?"

"Well, if you are ready to help pay for a schoolhouse," answered Frayden, "perhaps you will be able to pay me that fifty dollars that was due last spring."

"I'll pay it back, all right, Frayden, but I don't intend ter mortgage my self-respect for nobody," courageously answered the old man.

The other farmers who owed my stepfather money were not so brave. The pressure that Alexander Frayden could bring to bear upon them, if he would, caused them to yield to his suggestions. As a result, the meeting soon disbanded without any definite action being taken.

During the haying season that followed, James and I found many opportunities for confidences and we often discussed our plans for the future. He was for seeing the world before he settled down, while I was bent on securing an education. How, I did not know; but with money laid away with which to carry me through a winter term of school, if we had one, I looked forward to the future in joyful anticipation. The pleasure of studying, however, had to be set aside temporarily for more urgent duties.

By this time we were busy with the threshers. A distant settler had purchased a threshing machine, which he drove from farm to farm, serving each settler in turn. James and I took turns with the others in the work about the machine when it came to our farm. The various farmers contributed a day or more of labor, which in turn my stepbrother and I repaid in like labor. We not only helped with our own threshing but we were "farmed out" later to help the neighbors who had assisted us.

The steam threshing machine had not yet made its appearance, at least in our part of the Territory. The motive power consisted of several teams hitched to sweeps which, like the spokes of a wheel, radiated from a central hub covered by a platform, upon which stood the driver of the horses. This apparatus was known as the "power." It was connected with the threshing machine by long tumbling-rods which transmitted the power direct to the machine.

To drive the teams around and around in a circle, furnishing the motive power for the threshing machine, was a pleasure any boy would enjoy. Mounted on a platform in the center of the circle of horses with a long whip in hand, it was my duty to keep the teams moving. I still can hear the creaking of the gears and the sing-song whining of the threshing machine, with an occasional "burr" as the cylinder choked with a sheaf of wheat fed by mistake butt-end into the machine.

It was the custom to build the grain stacks in groups of four, which were known as "settings." The threshing machine was driven between the stacks, two on each side. When two of the stacks were threshed, the machine was pulled forward a few feet so that the feeding or band tables would be opposite the other two stacks.

At times I was allowed to cut bands. With a great sharp knife, I stood on a sort of scaffolding that formed a part of the machine. As a sheaf of wheat fell from the pitcher's fork upon the band table before me, with a quick slash of the knife I cut into the sheaf, sundering the string tied around it by the binder in the field. Then, with a movement of my other hand, I pushed the loosened sheaf on to the feeder, who with a fan-like motion fed the grain, now from my table and now from the one at his other side, into the cylinder of the machine.

Again, I took my turn in the straw stack, the dirtiest and most dreaded place about a threshing machine. Here, the straw almost buried me as it flowed in torrents from the straw-carrier at the rear of the machine; and here the loose chaff eddied and circled in little cyclonic clouds that blinded me, as I forked the gushing straw away from the machine.

If we were busy at our work, the women folk were equally busy in their preparations to feed the threshers. As the neighboring farmers turned out to help each other, so their wives contributed their services in the kitchen. To feed a dozen or more hungry farm hands is no small chore. Threshing was an important event in the calendar of the farmer's wife. For days in advance, the women had been engaged in preparing great quantities of good things to eat.

I had helped my stepfather kill our pet pig for the occasion. It seemed that I had been turning the grindstone for an hour before he finished sharpening the long butcher's knife. Aunt Mary and sister Irene watched us furtively — their eyes red from weeping — for both had protested excitedly against the coming slaughter, but my stepfather had only laughed at them. As we proceeded, they both ran into the house, covering their heads with their aprons to drown out the cries of the hog. My stepfather never afterwards ceased to twit me for my weakness; for, as he set himself to finishing his task, I rolled off the body of the hog, upon which I had been sitting in an attempt to hold it down, in a dead faint.

"A great farmer you will make!" roared Alexander Frayden as he rose to his feet.

The improvised tables were laden with all that the farm supplied and with many delicacies from town which we could not very well afford. But each family in the neighborhood vied with the others in trying to set the best table for the threshers, and the glory of Frayden's Folly must be maintained.

The dinner was the great event of the threshing day. The crude but honest witticisms that were bandied back and forth at the table, the zest with which each worker helped himself to every dish, and the spirit of coöperation and friendliness manifested, played an important part in bringing together the various families of the neighborhood.

With these and other interesting experiences about the claims, I was kept busy and fairly happy. On Sundays, I attended the congregation organized by the Reverend Miles, much to my stepfather's chagrin. Unable to deter me from my choice, he vented his sarcasm upon all those who attended these services. To counteract the new organization, with the aid of Rounds and Brother Jones he organized another society called "The Saints." But to me there seemed more profession of saintliness than practice of it, especially in those who were responsible for the organization. They certainly showed little constructive Christianity in blocking the efforts of the settlers who wished to provide their children with an education, or in refusing overtures on the part of the Reverend Miles to organize a church made up of all denominations.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE LAST BUFFALO HUNT

THE hunting season was upon us. The vast treeless area of prairie no longer was covered with an emerald carpet or studded with the rich colorings of spring. The brilliant tints and shadings of the summer wild flowers also had disappeared, giving place to the grays and purples of fall. A tawny covering spread over the plains. Tumble weeds chased one another across the great flat stretches, in places filling up the ravines and sloughs, or lodging in the barbed wire fences like impaled soldiers of fortune. Occasionally a miniature whirlwind sent a storm of dust across the prairies. Soon the jack rabbit would be changing his coat; already the hair of the horses and cattle was thickening in preparation for the coming winter. The wild geese, in wedge-shape formation, were flying low, and brother James had brought one down with a shotgun.

About two miles to the north of Frayden's Folly stretched an unusually large lake bed. Unlike the others so common in the neighborhood, this one was covered with a thick growth of rushes taller than a man's head. For seven miles, east and west, this relic of post-glacial days held for us a great charm. Swan Lake it was called, although it was without either water or swans. In the spring, it is true, a little water did drain into it, but it was soon dried up by the summer sun. The lake drained into a creek which ran into the Little Cheyenne, one of the small branches of the Missouri River.

Much game followed these watercourses into the lake. We spent as much time here as possible, hunting various wild animals. The fox we found in abundance; occasionally we saw a wildcat, also a few timber wolves that came up the Little Cheyenne from the wooded banks of the Missouri. Stray bands of antelope were sometimes to be seen on their way to some feeding ground not yet encroached upon by man.

Across one end of, the lake bed the beavers had once built a dam which was now used as a road. Near the old beaver dam lived our friend Manfred, the Indian fighter. He had moved here from his dugout near Farmer City.

"Let's go up and see Manfred," James one day suggested.

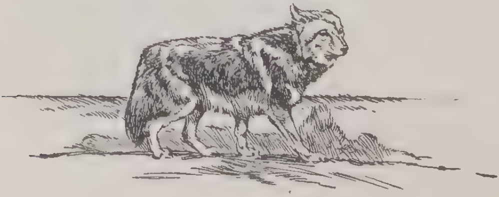
"Suppose your father will let us?"

"He's going to Pembroke for the mail. We'll wait until he gets started."

Hurrying through with our chores, we waited impatiently for my stepfather to be on his way. In due season we were astride our ponies and galloping across the prairies. On the way my pony stepped into a coyote's hole and nearly threw me. At first I was afraid the pony had broken its leg, so badly did it limp: but soon we found there was nothing more serious than a bad wrench.

"Hello, there!" called Manfred as he saw us. "Who's this? If it ain't my leetle friends from Frayden's Folly! By jumpin' Jupiter, I'm right glad to see yer!"

"Seen any Injuns in these parts?" James asked laughingly.



A coyote.

"Nary a Redskin, sonny," he replied. "Guess we scart 'em away for good. Ain't yer goin' ter stop a spell?"

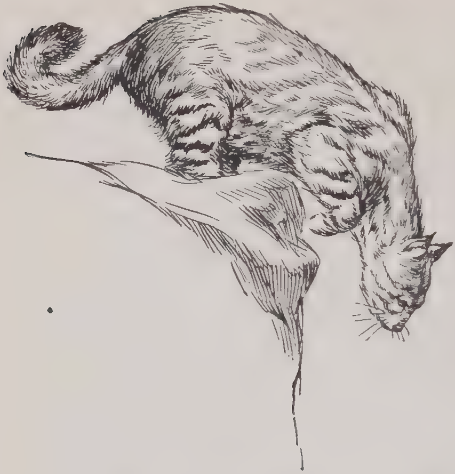
"Sure!" we said, jumping from our ponies. "Anything to eat in the house, Manfred?"

"Make yer some flapjacks if yer wants 'em," the old man replied.

His hut was dug out of the bank of the lake bed, faced with a sod wall, and roofed over with poles covered with matted straw. In one corner was a dilapidated kitchen stove. Beside it lay a pile of buffalo chips and some dried rushes from the lake bed. Against one wall stood a kitchen table; and in another corner was his bunk, made of stakes driven into the sod and supported by two upright timbers. A straw mattress, a blanket or two, and a buffalo robe made his couch. Under the bed he had built a shelf for the storage of odds and ends.

On the table rested several shallow pans of milk which Manfred now proceeded to skim. Pouring part of the skimmed milk into some flour, he directed James to add baking powder, while I was permitted to add a dash of salt. Soon we had a batter ready. We watched the old man with much interest as he deftly flipped the cakes, throwing each one, when half-baked, into the air, giving it a twist with his wrist that brought it down upon the griddle on its unbaked side. Covering the cakes with butter and sorghum, we ate ravenously, much to the old man's delight.

After lunch Manfred suggested, "Long's you've brought yer guns with yer let's go out and see what we can see. Mebbe we kin uncover a red fox. Saw the footprints of a wildcat, too, last night. Jest a stray, I s'pose. They seldom leave th' timber. Ugly brutes! Nearly got me one day."



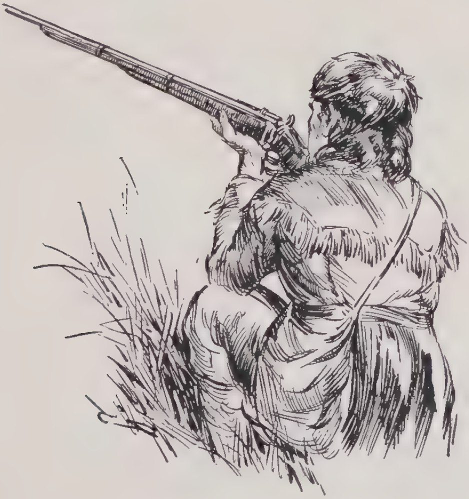
"Tell us about it," I urged, as we tramped toward the lake bed.

"Well, it was this way. I was down in a gulch by th' Missouri, lookin' fer some timber wolves what had been gettin' some of my sheep. 'Fore I knowed it, I was right under a cat. I could see his green eyes in th' branches right over me. I pulled my rifle to my shoulder quicker'n a wink, but I jest notched th' beast in th' leg. He give an orful yowl an' landed with a spring right on my left shoulder an' down I went. My rifle dropped from my hand, but I grabbed a knife from my belt an' stuck him clean through th' heart. He left his scratches, all right," Manfred added, as he bared his left arm and showed us a dozen red slashes that time had not been able to obliterate.

As he talked of old times, our youthful imaginations peopled our claim and the surrounding country with the vanished Sioux who once roamed over it. We could almost hear the thundering tramp of the great herds of buffalo, the skeletons of which still whitened the plains. We went marching with the government soldiers in pursuit of refractory Redskins and we lived through the old scout's fights with wolves and wildcats. We could even go back to the days of Lewis and Clark and trace their journey up the Missouri River; at least from Fort Pierre or Fort Sully on the south, to Fort Berthold on the north. On the day we visited him at Farmer City, Manfred had shown us a place where they had camped.

He taught us many interesting things about the wild life of the country, revealing to us that he was not only a keen observer but something of a philosopher.

"Now ain't it cur'ous 'bout them air beaver? See that road 'cross Swan Lake? It's nearly two mile long. A man couldn't er done a better job at buildin' a dam. Yer see, there's a scatterin' growth of bushes an' cottonwoods on Swan Crick. There usta be water in th' crick an' th' lake too, when I first come to th' country, but after th' lake dried up, th' beavers left. They gnaw down th' trees with their teeth an' carry logs an' branches



"'Fore I knowed it, I was right under a cat."

an' plaster 'em with mud an' make their houses in that way. They allus dams a place in fresh water. They don't hanker for stagnant water. Why, do yer know, they have took beavers an' set 'em down in a country where there ain't no trees an' after fifty years th' young have been took back ter a place where there are trees an' darned if they don't go right at biting 'em down! Ain't that cur'ous? How could they remember doin' somethin' they never did do? They kin make a tree fall jest where they wants it ter fall.

"Animals are queer critters. Rather live with most of 'em than with mankin'. Trust 'em more," Manfred added as an afterthought. "Smart? Why, they kin think of more smart things to do than a man ever dreamed of. Now, there's Shep," he said, patting the dog on the head. "Did yer ever have sech a friend? He knows all yer tell 'im an' he don't blab any of yer secrets, neither; do you, Shep? Animals won't hurt nobody, if nobody hurts them. Their principul occypation is takin' keer of their young an' gettin' enough to eat. Take th' prairie dog, fer instance. Ever see a prairie-dog town?"

Neither of us had.

"Too bad! I'll take yer to see one some day; it's over near Farmer City. Kivers sev'ral acres. All holes an' piles of dirt 'roun' 'em, and Mr. and Mrs. Prairie Dog spends much time settin' on their doorstep in th' sun. If they sees yer comin' they'll be settin' on their hin' legs lookin' straight at yer as yer pull th' trigger to fire at 'em, but nine time outer ten, they'll drop into their hole 'fore yer bullet reaches 'em. If it does hit 'em, they drops out of sight anyways.

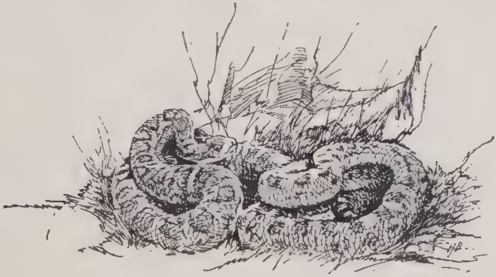
"There's them as says th' prairie dog digs its hole down ter water; but tain't so. They alwuz lives in land that's dry an' no good anyhow, an' yer can't find water in sech places if yer go down a hundred feet or more. Then they says th' prairie dog lives in a hole with a rattlesnake an' an owl, but that ain't so neither. All th' mother dog wants ter do is ter perteck her young an' if that's so, do yer 'spose she'd take a snake inter her nest?"

"But how about the skunk?" I asked. "He's not a respectable animal."

"Ain't he?" Manfred replied scornfully. "He's not so bad lookin' neither. He'll keep outer yer way, if yer let 'im; but really he's inclined to be sort of a friendly animal. He'll let yer pass right by 'im an' never touch yer. It's only when yer steps on his toes, or he's afraid yer goin' ter git after 'im, that he uses th' only weapon nature give 'im."

"But the rattlesnake," James said; "surely he's dangerous."

"No he ain't neither, onless yer gits in his way; an' then he acts the gentleman. What does he do if he sees yer comin'? Looks yer square in th' eye an' rattles an' rattles his tail as much as ter say, 'Don't yer come no closter. Don't yer try ter hurt me!' If yer turns outer his path, he'll drop to th' groun' an' go on 'bout his bizness. If yer persist, howsomever, an' fail ter mind his warnin', he'll take it fer granted yer intend to 'tack



A rattlesnake.

'im an' so he don't take no more chances but hits out. What is more fairer 'n that?"

"Did you ever see a buffalo, Manfred?" I asked.

"Herds of 'em, sonny. Now, there's a cur'ous animal. They goes in herds, but they's like a woman, — terrible cur'ous. They wants to 'vestigate everythin' they don't understan'. They knows a man on horseback, but if he gits offen his critter, th' buffalo will take after 'im. Th' faster he runs, th' faster they comes after. Th' whole herd'll foller, an' of course there's danger of bein' tromped to death. If a man sees one of th' critters takin' after 'im, he should lay down if th' animal isn't runnin' too fast. Th' buffalo will come up an' sniff of 'im, an' then he's satisfied what th' man is an' he'll turn an' go ter feedin'. It's his powe'ful cur'osity. Herd cattle act th' same way, too."

"How about antelope?" I asked.

"Pronghorn, yer mean? Oh, he's a native of th' plains. He has a prong on his horn, yer know. It's less than a foot long. Th' females don't have 'em at all. He uses it to fight with; that is, to defend hisself with, like a guard to ward off a blow. Take th' mother animal. She hides her young, an' if she sees yer comin' she'll lead yer a merry chase, first in one direction, then in tother, until yer lose all sense of th' place where yer first saw her. Yer can't see th' young easy, 'cause they're marked so they blends in with th' grass an' th' earth."

"What's that?" suddenly exclaimed James, as he pointed across the lake bed to the opposite bank.

"Bless my hide, if it ain't th' very animal we're talkin' 'bout!" Manfred replied excitedly. "Haven't seen a herd of pronghorn fer sev'ral years."

About three miles to the northeast of us, across the lake bed on the opposite bank, about fifty antelope were contentedly grazing.

"Let me take yer glass," Manfred said.

I handed him my stepfather's long-distance glasses, which I had taken, and Manfred eyed the herd carefully. As he did so, the animals suddenly stopped feeding and raised their heads in expectancy.

"Look!" cried James. "There's another herd three or four miles west of them!"

They too stood poised with heads erect, as if ready for flight.

"They must see us," I cried.

"Take a look an' tell me what yer see," Manfred said as he handed me the field glasses.

"Why — nothing but antelope," I answered, handing the glasses to James.

"An' what do you see, sonny?" Manfred asked.

"The same thing — antelope," James answered.

"Not very obsarvin', are yer? Did yer notice them air white patches on their buttocks?"

"Yes, but I didn't think anything of that," I answered in surprise.

"Yer didn't? Now look agin an' see if yer see anythin' queer 'bout that white hair."

"Why, yes, how funny!" I said, again looking through the glasses. "It seems to be standing straight out!"

"That's th' way the animal has of signaling to th' other herd that it's seen somethin'. When they wants to give a signal ter some other herd, they makes th' white hair on th' stern raise right up an' th' other herd sees it an' takes warnin'. Yer know, th' pronghorn has eyes as can see better than I kin with this glass, an' when they's feedin' or restin' there's always some of 'em on guard."

"But it can't be us they see," James said. "We are hidden from them."

"Yer right, boy; it sorta puzzles me what it is that's frightened 'em."

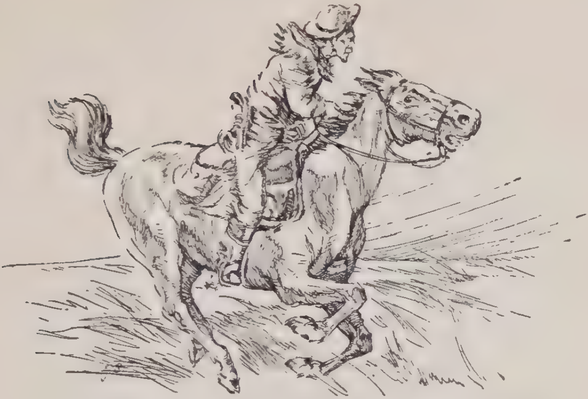
Manfred no sooner had finished speaking than the herd took to their heels in the direction of the other herd to the west, which now was also in full flight. With great leaps they bounded across the plains, easing up sufficiently to turn around an occasional clump of bushes, for the antelope of the plains has learned little about jumping as a deer would do. They seemed to be running in circles, but ever onward in wider and wider circles and farther into the distance. A beautiful sight they made against the sky line of the prairies. I have chased jack rabbits on horseback, and have seen the greyhound at its best, but never have I seen animals travel faster than did this herd of antelope.

"Yer know," Manfred said, after the herd had disappeared from view, "th' pronghorn is th' oldest animal we have left from ancient days. It was livin' when all kinds of strange monsters was on earth. I have talked to some of them museum fellers from th' East that was over in th' Bad Lands, 'cross th' Missouri, where they was diggin' fer bones of extinct animals that lived, they said, thousan's an' thousan's of years ago. One of 'em said as how when these critters were livin' th' pronghorn was one of their feller animals, an' that he's th' only one that survived until this day."

"Look!" James interrupted. "It's a man on horseback that scared them. He's running after something. A steer, I think!"

"A steer, nothin'!" retorted Manfred. "Run quick an' git yer horses! It's a buffalo!"

With that, the old man ran in the direction of the



"'It's a man on horseback, running after something.'"

dugout, near which our horses were picketed. Soon we were mounted and running as fast as our ponies would take us across the beaver's dam, to the other side of the lake bed. Manfred had his rifle. James and I each had ours. The man was chasing the buffalo in our direction.

"Be keerful yer broncho don't throw yer!" warned Manfred, as we approached the oncoming buffalo.

By this time the animal saw us coming. Evidently it had been maddened by a bullet from the gun of its pursuer. With head down, its great thick horns pointed in our direction, it charged forward as if intending to run us down.

"It's an ol' bull!" Manfred yelled. "Be keerful, boys; he's dangerous!"

The man in the rear of the animal was gaining rapidly on the now spent buffalo. Evidently fearing that we would beat him in the chase and shoot the bull before he had the opportunity, he shouldered his rifle and fired without taking careful aim. The bullet hit the buffalo in the flank. The animal hesitated for a second and then, pawing the earth, it charged once more in our direction with an awful roar.

Fortunately for us, Shep ran barking toward the animal's head, diverting its attention from us for the moment, and thus giving us time to recover our self-possession. I was afraid the dog would be gored. Once or twice it looked as if the beast had the dog foul; but with ready wit Shep dashed between the forelegs of the maddened animal, jumping and snapping at its flanks.

"Don't shoot between th' eyes!" yelled Manfred. "Th' skull an' th' hair is too thick! You an' Jim ride ter th' right, an' I'll go ter th' left. Aim behind th' foreleg!"

We both were too much excited to exercise ordinary judgment. We were afraid to fire for fear of hitting Shep. James, however, finally did manage to fire, and then I shouldered my rifle, tried to take aim, and shut my eyes as I pulled the trigger. The first bullet hit the buffalo in the middle, while my shot evidently struck the right shoulder.

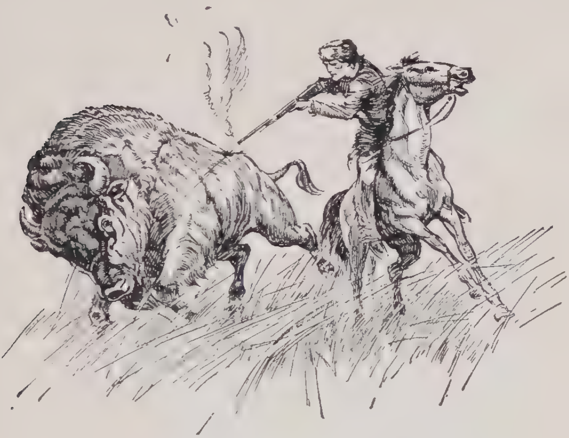
The buffalo at once swerved in our direction, giving Manfred the opportunity he sought. Bringing his horse to a halt, he took deliberate aim and pulled the trigger. No sooner had he done so than the animal came to its knees. Again and again Manfred shot. The beast staggered to its feet, made one more lurch forward, and then plunged limp to the ground.

"It's my game!" suddenly called the stranger. Although he appeared to be a half-breed Indian, we knew him to be a squaw man, the father of the La Dusk whom we had met at Farmer City.

"Your game, eh?" retorted Manfred. "Queer place fer a ol' hand like you to hit a bull buffalo, now, ain't it? Who'd a thought yer could kill sech a critter by hittin' 'im in th' flank?"

"I saw 'im first," replied La Dusk sulkily.

"Sure yer did, but we got 'im. Yer kin have your share, La Dusk. Th' hide goes to th' boys, an' they kin have their share of meat, an' you kin have yourn."



"The animal came to its knees."

It was not long before La Dusk, with our help, had skillfully removed the hide, and between us we soon had the carcass drawn and quartered. With a good supply of meat, La Dusk was sent on his way. In the meantime, Manfred had sent James back to his barn with instructions to hitch the team to the wagon and to return as soon as possible.

"It seems a shame, Manfred," I said. "Just think; probably he is the last wild buffalo in the Territory."

"If we hadn't done it, the other feller would 'er got 'im. They's doomed anyways. But it was a shame th' way they kilt 'em off in my day. Fool tenderfeet from th' East, an' even Guvermint 'ficials, that should have known better, come out here and ter Wyomin' an' paid some of th' scouts to hunt th' poor critters down like varmints. Why, I've knowed one buffalo hunter to kill as many as fifty in a single day. No sense in killin' game when you have no use fer it!"

By this time James had come up with us, and soon we had loaded into the wagon all that was left of the carcass that was worth saving. By the time we had reached Manfred's, it was growing dusk. We were alarmed as we realized that we had been away from home for the greater part of the day. We knew the women folks would be worried about us, and our absence would not easily be pardoned by Alexander Frayden. As we expressed our fears, Manfred said, "Leave it to me, boys. Th' old man won't say nothin' when he finds yer've killed the last wild buffalo in the hull of Dakota Territory. This meat will go a long way to quiet yer dad."

His words proved true. My stepfather was astounded to learn of our exploit, and the buffalo meat was a welcome change from the homely fare we had been subjected to during the lean months of the summer. In fact, we were treated as heroes by the folks at home and, later, by the neighbors. Even Zeke Rounds did not hesitate to express his approval. We felt we had played a real part in a real drama, – a drama that never could be reënacted in this country.

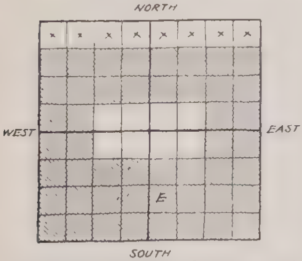
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HORTON'S CLAIM

How my stepfather managed to get the free use of eighty acres of land is a story that stirred the entire neighborhood. The trick was turned when he first filed upon the lands of Frayden's Folly, and it was not discovered by the neighbors for some time.

A settler was entitled to three claims of one hundred and sixty acres each, or four hundred and eighty acres in all. Each section of land contains six hundred and forty acres, divided into four quarter-sections of one hundred and sixty acres each. My stepfather picked out a section in which no claims had been filed. Then, instead of filing claims on three even quarter-sections, he filed in such a way that his land completely surrounded an eighty-acre strip which was left unclaimed. This strip he plowed up so that it appeared to be a part of the rest of the breaking which he had done on Frayden's Folly.

For a long time, the neighbors did not realize that my stepfather had practically taken possession of eighty acres upon which no one had filed. Just how he accomplished it is a difficult thing to describe, but a drawing we boys once made of Frayden's Folly shows how he succeeded in isolating this eighty acres of land.



A section of 640 acres. The shaded squares represent the three claims of Frayden's Folly. Each of the four large squares represents a claim of 160 acres, the usual form in which a claim was laid out. Each small square represents 10 acres. The eight small squares in the center show the 80 acres cut off from settlement by my stepfather. The eight small squares across the top, marked with crosses, represent the rest of the land in the section, not filed upon by any one and still open to settlement at the time. The letter E marks the location of our house.

Such a bit of questionable shrewdness certainly did not endear Alexander Frayden to his neighbors. Indeed, this trick, combined with his part in defeating the building of a schoolhouse, made him very unpopular in the township. The act, however, which finally kindled the settlers' wrath was his attempt to jump another man's claim.

Representatives of nearly every trade and profession settled in Dakota Territory. Men from the office, the store, the factory, and the schoolroom, in quest of a larger freedom than they had been enjoying, overran the country in their haste to get rich by acquiring land. It was the day of the great land hunger. The Government's provisions were so generous that a person could file upon a claim and yet be granted liberal leave of absence while earning money elsewhere. So long as a certain number of acres were put under cultivation and so long as a definite number of days were spent upon a claim, there was little danger of losing it by contest. It is true that there were many who had no intention of living upon the land upon which they had filed. Their desire was to spend only as much time upon a claim as was necessary to "prove up" and then, having obtained title, to sell the land to speculators. Most of the attempts to acquire the land, however, were honest endeavors to establish a permanent home in the Territory.

Directly to the east of us, bordering Frayden's Folly, lay a valuable quarter section. It had been filed on by a young man from Chicago by the name of John Horton, a likable chap who had won the respect of the neighboring settlers. Not much was known of him, other than that he was a bachelor with little or no funds, and that he had been a clerk in one of the large city stores.

Often I had heard my stepfather express regret that he had not filed upon this claim before Horton secured it; but, having exhausted all of his rights of filing, he was compelled to look on as this adjoining tract slipped from his grasp. The more he thought over the matter, the more he convinced himself that this claim should have belonged to him.

About this time, my stepsister Jennie celebrated her twenty-first birthday, and with it came her right, if she sought to exercise it, of filing upon a claim. This fact was mentioned at the table, in joke, on the very morning of her birthday. I noticed my stepfather suddenly give ear to our idle prattle and become abstracted during the rest of the meal. I did not understand the significance of his thoughtfulness at the time, but the next day I had cause to recall it.

"I am going to Huron, mother," he said, the following day. "I want to take Jennie with me. I promised I would give her a birthday gift, and this trip will take its place."

"What did he promise you, Jen?" I heard James whisper to his sister.

"Nothing!" she replied. "Never spoke to me about my birthday."

"I bet he's going to have her file on a claim," I said to James, as we walked to the barn, a short time after this conversation took place.

"What claim?" James asked incredulously. "All the land around here that's worth taking has been taken long ago."

A week passed before Jennie and her father returned from Huron. It had been a week of speculation for James and me. My stepfather made no mention of their visit and Jennie had nothing to say. Finally, we could endure the suspense no longer.

"Did you file on a claim, Jen?" James asked, abandoning all indirect methods in his anxiety to learn the object of her trip to Huron.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," was all she would reply.

"Can't you think of anything better than that to say?" I asked.

"Yes, I could, Don," she replied, "but it wouldn't be polite and I don't want to hurt your feelings.",

The truth, however, came out with the next issue of the *Pembroke Clarion*, a little weekly sheet issued at the neighboring post-office hamlet.

Like all farmers in sparsely settled regions, we read every word of the newspaper from the local news to the "patent insides," including the patent medicine advertisements. Here, among the legal notices, we found one to the effect that Jennie Frayden, spinster, contested the filing of one John Horton on the southwest quarter of Section 2, Township —, Range —, etc.

"So that's the game!" I whispered to James, as I pushed the paper across the table to him and pointed to the contest notice.

"Je-ru-salem!" exclaimed James, as he looked up at me after reading it.

"What is the matter with you, James?" his father reprimanded impatiently. "If you cannot read, be quiet and let others do so."

Beckoning to James, I left the table and soon we had our heads together in the kitchen.

"Won't the settlers be hopping mad?" James said. "Every one likes Horton. Sam Rounds told me that he came out here on account of his health and he has to go back to the city and work part of the time to make a living."

"Yes, and I heard he had to support his old mother and that he was trying to educate his little sister," I replied.

If we were indignant, what could be said of the neighbors, who, having read the contest notice in the *Clarion*, made no pretense of disguising their opinion of my stepfather's latest scheme?

The Federal law permitted a settler to spend a certain amount of time away from a claim not proved up; but if his absence exceeded the limit, any adult could bring action in the form of a contest. Then, if the contest suit were won the contester, if eligible to take up Government land, could file on the claim in question. Horton evidently had outstayed his legal allowance of absence, which made it possible for my stepfather to bring such a suit in his daughter's name.

Contesting another's claim was anything but a popular proceeding, unless it were clear that the claim had been abandoned. Horton's popularity among the settlers would not fail to bring nearly every one to his defense.

"Why did you do it, Jen?" I asked, at the first opportunity of being free from my stepfather's presence.

"Father made me!" she replied, bursting into tears.

"Yes, and Horton always thought you the finest girl in the township," James spoke up.

"James! James! Please stop! I won't listen," she protested.

"He was always hanging around you. Didn't he invite you to go to the social at Bacon's, and didn't he always take you to prayer meeting? Mighty mean trick to play on a fellow that likes you as well as Horton does," I added.

Between her sobs, she told us how her father had threatened and commanded, until there seemed no recourse but to sign the contest notice he had drawn up.

No one who had experienced Alexander Frayden's wrath would have blamed the girl for fearing her father or for being coerced by him.

"I don't want the old claim; I wouldn't have it for a gift! Do you boys suppose I'd be mean enough to do a thing like that willingly? What will the neighbors think of me?"

"Why, they will know it was none of your doings, Jen," I said, trying to comfort her. "James and I will tell them the truth."

Indeed, we kept our promise to the letter. Perhaps we even embellished the story a trifle. Violet Rounds offered to aid us in spreading our explanation, and it was she who insisted on putting it that "Alexander Frayden compelled his own daughter to contest the claim of her lover."

"Sounds more romantic," she explained. "Besides, they will have more sympathy for your sister if they think she was forced to turn against the man she loved."

Needless to say, all accepted the explanation without question. It would have been absurd to think that a young girl like Jennie, of her own free will, would have stooped to such an act. Knowing her domineering father, they understood it was a matter of compulsion.

About this time, the news spread throughout the township that John Horton's mother had been killed in an accident and that he had been compelled to place his little sister in an orphanage. The bitterness against my stepfather rose to fever heat.

For some reason or other, the notice of the contest had not reached Horton as soon as it should have. When it did arrive, it was on the day of his mother's death. Following the burial of his mother, came the disposition to be made of his little sister. Grief and care drove from him all thought of his claim, and it was no wonder that he let the contest proceedings go by default, thus allowing my stepsister to make her filing.

Without waiting for further developments, so sure was my stepfather of legal rights that he at once began to make certain improvements upon what had been John Horton's claim. A new shack was built of lumber; a bed and a stove were installed; and here my sister was compelled to spend her nights in the company of Aunt Mary, that she might fulfill the provisions of the law regarding residence.

We at once set to work to break a twenty-acre tract of land, which, with the forty acres Horton had broken, made a very respectable acreage for the coming year.

We long had suspected that water might be found on John Horton's claim, but he seemed never to have enough money or time to give to sinking a well. Hole after hole we had dug and drilled on the lands of Frayden's Folly, but without finding water. My stepfather had brought a man from Ipswich who had a "witch stick" that was said to turn in his hand whenever he walked across land beneath which water might be found. The magic of the stick had failed to work for us; but one day when the Ipswich man wandered across the road to Horton's claim, the forked stick had turned downward in the man's hand.

My stepfather was confident that water would be found at this spot, and his confidence had only fanned the flame of his covetousness. It is true that, in time, we did find water on our land, at a depth of sixty feet; but the water was hard and so strongly impregnated with mineral substances that it was almost unfit for use.

Water free from alkali or other mineral substances was so scarce at this time that every drop of it was precious. Dishwater was even saved for the pigs and rinsing water was used the second time for suds. Sister Irene had secured a sickly geranium or two which she tried to cultivate, but it was only the water left from the family washing that could be used to help keep the plants alive, as none other could be spared for superfluous uses.

Naturally, then, having secured possession of Horton's claim, one of the first things my stepfather did was to sink a well on it. At sixteen feet, under the exact spot indicated by the "witch stick," we found an abundance of water that was as sweet and as soft as the finest mountain spring.

Nothing seemed to comfort my stepsister for the unfair advantage she had been compelled to take of young Horton. The news of his bereavement caused her the deepest distress, which reacted in feelings of indignation against her father. Periods of depression fell upon her that caused us all much alarm.

"Why don't you write to Horton, Jen?" I said to her one day. "Tell him all about it. He'll understand. Tell him you want him to come out and fight the contest. That will put you straight with him, if anything will. Tell him it is the only way you can justify yourself with the neighbors."

I could see in the glow of her eyes the sudden interest she took in my suggestion. She made no reply, but that night I watched her get out pen, ink, and paper and, I had reason to believe, address a letter to John Horton.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

Not many days after this, I brought home from the Pembroke post office a letter for Jennie. It bore the postmark *Chicago*, and I guessed that John Horton had answered her letter. The depression that had possessed her immediately vanished. And then several letters passed between them.

Soon the neighborhood was electrified by the report that Horton had returned. He had taken up temporary residence with the Reverend Miles; but, so far, he had made no attempt to take possession of the shack he had built for himself on the claim contested by my stepsister.

About this time, I noticed that Jennie began to take daily rambles over the prairies, ostensibly in search of wild flowers. As it was rather late in the season to find many flowers on the prairies, I came to the conclusion that something besides flowers was the object of her walks.

There were few places within miles of Frayden's Folly where one could be out of sight of passing travelers. Trees there were none. Only the slight depression of some slough or ravine could provide a hiding-place, and there one could not be safe from intrusion. One night I was just about to enter a rather deep ravine in search of the oxen, which had been turned out to graze, when I saw Jennie in conversation with John Horton.

It was just about dusk. The sun had gone down in a blaze of gold that had spread fan-like across the western sky, bathing the tawny plains in a sea of color, a wonderful contrast to the deep purples of the northern heavens. A meadow lark voiced its evening song, a fitting accompaniment for the love scene staged in the shadows of the ravine below me. Hand in hand with him, my stepsister stood looking up into the face of John Horton, the man whose claim she had contested.

At once I hurriedly retraced my steps. I wondered why Horton should be making love to my stepsister, if he contemplated a legal battle against her in order to regain his claim. Since his return, he apparently had made no effort to attack the contest decision.

I did not mention my discovery to James. Had my stepfather known of it, he would have disowned his daughter and turned her out of the house. This fact I fully realized, and, with a boyish sense of romance, I made up my mind I would keep her secret and abet her plans.

"Say, Jen," I remarked one day, as she dipped a pail into the barrel of drinking water that stood at the back door, "are you and Horton going to get married?"

At my remark, she dropped the pail into the bottom of the barrel and stood erect in alarm.

"Now see what you made me do, smarty!" she said, as she looked helplessly into the barrel of water, wondering how to get the pail.

"I'll get it," I exclaimed, as I seized a pitchfork standing nearby. Fishing in the barrel, which I managed to pull slightly toward me, I soon recovered the pail. "I didn't mean anything, Jen," I apologized, "only I saw you the other night in the ravine just west of the house."

Tears of indignation gathered in her eyes as she began to upbraid me for spying on her.

"Listen, Jen; listen!" I implored. "I won't tell any one; honest, I won't. I'll help you. Didn't I tell you to write to Horton? I like him; every one does, and they all know he thinks a lot of you, Jen. I haven't told a soul; not even James. If you want me to carry any messages, Jen, you know I'll do it, and no one will know it, either!"

"Don, I believe you," she replied, drying her eyes. Suddenly she threw her arms about me and gave me a hug. "I know you won't tell."

"Not a word!" I reassured her.

So began my employment as a messenger of love. The notes the two wrote became more frequent, the more difficult it became for them to see each other.

I wished that I could send a note to Maud Warren, but the thought came to me that I had no one to carry it for me. Then, too, what was there to write about? I wished that my stepsister would let me read the notes she received from Horton; perhaps they would give me an inkling of what one should write about in such circumstances. I resolved that some day I would set myself to a similar task.

In time, the settlers of the Blue Blanket Valley became aware that John Horton was seeking to reöpen the contest instigated by my stepfather. This news seemed especially gratifying to the neighbors, and as the time for the hearing drew near, local feeling became intense.

Horton always had seemed to like me, and now that I was arrayed actively on his side, he gave me a confidence that at first even Jennie had denied me.

"Don, your sister and I are going to be married as soon as we can. We will move on the claim, and I shall be able to bring my little sister Elizabeth out here. I can't bear to think of her in a public institution. She is just about your age, Don. How would you like it to be shut up with strange boys and girls, herded together like a flock of sheep? It won't make any difference whether I win or lose the claim. If Jennie wins, I win, because

I am going to marry her, and your stepfather is more than exerting himself to improve the place. Why, he dug a fine well for us, I hear, and he has shored it up, too. I understand he has built a better shack than I had and that he has broken nearly forty acres. I couldn't afford to do all that; at least not for some little time. On the other hand, if I do win the contest, I will have the claim back and your sister will be vindicated; so, whichever way it goes, I win!"

The joke was certainly on my stepfather. I could not refrain from laughing heartily. It seemed too good to keep to myself, but I had promised Horton not to say a word about it.

Suddenly, it occurred to me to ask, "But why fight the contest?"

"Because Jennie insists upon it," he replied. "She feels it is not right for me to allow her father to take my claim without putting up a fight. I intend to make this my home, and, if I am to have the respect of my neighbors, I must show them that I have enough grit to stand up and fight for my rights. It's a matter of principle, Don."

I was glad that Horton had come to this decision. Many a time in later life I was made to realize the truth of his words and what fighting for principle meant.

Romance had been busy not only in my stepsister's life but in brother William's as well. We had not heard much from William since he left home. During the haying season, he had gone to help Henry Bacon. The Bacon family consisted of the father and mother, a son, Henry, and a daughter named Mary. Summer had hardly given place to autumn when, to our amazement, word came that brother William had taken up a claim a few miles west of the Bacon farm and that he and Mary had been married.

Mother and Aunt Mary were overjoyed at the thought that William would now have a home of his own, humble though it might be. If only a sod shack, it could, with love, be made such a home as he had not known for many a month.

Frost already was beginning to show during the early hours of the morning. What little corn there was stood in shocks in the field. The wheat crop had been so poor that the straw stacks in the stubble fields resembled diminutive haycocks. Every blade must be saved, if not for bedding for the stock, then to serve the more important purpose of feed, poor nutriment though it was, for the hay crop also had been very light. Owing to the intense heat of the summer and the almost total absence of rain, the prairies had a very meager covering of grass, and in many places even in the lake beds the grass had not been worth cutting. The coming winter promised to be hard on live stock, as well as on the settlers. The absence of feed meant many dry cows and, therefore, little milk and no butter.

For months, our pantry shelves had been bare of canned and package goods. The shortage of feed had compelled us to sell off the hogs early in the season. Chickens and other fowls also had been sacrificed in the same way. Salt pork, bread without butter, coffee and tea without sugar or milk constituted our diet. There seemed to be no money left, except for the barest of needs. Potatoes we had in abundance, as the crop had been good; but potatoes without butter, or served only with a thin milk gravy, soon became unpalatable.

At last the long-awaited day for the rehearing on the contest approached. My stepfather and Jennie, together with Rounds and Preacher Jones, who were to act as witnesses for my stepfather, set out in a lumber wagon for Blunt, where they were to take the train for the land office at Huron.

A week elapsed, but no word came to relieve our suspense. The following Sunday, however, through our field glasses James and I descried the party returning home. Our interest in the outcome had reached the boiling point. We dared ask no questions in the presence of my stepfather; but as he jumped from the wagon, tossing the reins to me, I could see from his sullen manner that Horton had won back his claim. If anything further was needed to convey the news, the smile on my stepsister's face served the purpose.

"John won. He proved that he had been away just one day less than the law allowed him," Jennie whispered as she hurried past us into the house.

While we unhitched the team and fed and watered the horses, we speculated upon the effect the loss of the contest would have upon Jennie's father.

Despite the fact that it was Sunday, the noon meal hardly was over before my stepfather ordered us to hitch a team to the wagon. Not daring to inquire his purpose, James and I proceeded to obey him.

My mother protested feebly against his command, fearing his intention. A look that alarmed me showed in her face. For weeks, mother had been hovering dangerously near a nervous breakdown. As the never-ending wind had kept our nerves at a tension all during the fall, so the constant succession of trouble and bickering, of deprivations and hardships, was working with cumulative effect upon mother. Throughout the absence of my stepfather and Jennie I had noticed her unusual agitation, followed at times by sharp periods of depression. I feared the effect upon her of whatever my stepfather intended to do.

Soon we had the team hitched to the lumber wagon and were waiting for him at the kitchen door.

"Jump in!" he commanded roughly. We obeyed.

The sullen man, striking one of the horses with a rawhide that was used only on the thick hides of the oxen, started the team down the road.

James and I had taken out the tailboard and had seated ourselves on the floor of the wagon with our feet hanging out.

"He's going over to Horton's claim!" I whispered.

My surmise was correct. In a few minutes we pulled up in front of the shack that my stepfather had had built on the land he had planned to take from another man. Opening the door, he commanded us to remove everything within and to pile it into the wagon.

While we were occupied with this task, my stepfather walked down to the well he had dug. He removed the bucket and rope and brought them back to the wagon and then returned to the well. As we finished our task, we turned in that direction and in bewilderment watched his strange actions.

Stones rarely were found upon the prairies in any abundance, except on the knolls and hills and the buttes bordering them. A small area of land about the well, however, was studded with good-sized boulders. The maddened man pried loose these stones with a crowbar. Then, picking up such of them as he could lift, he hurled them with great force down into the well.

"If you are through there, come over here!" he yelled at us, as he noticed us gaping in amazement at his wild performance.

"Why are you doing that?" James mustered courage to ask as we approached.

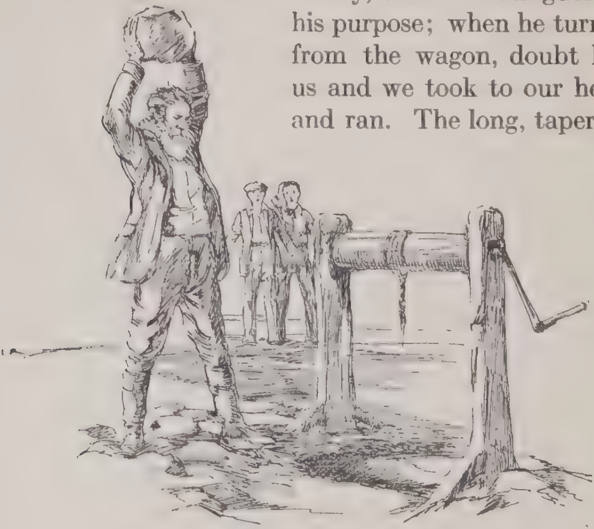
"None of your business!" he shouted. "Get busy both of you and throw these rocks into the well! Quick! Move! Don't stand there with your mouths open like a couple of ninnies!"

Neither of us moved.

"It's wicked! It's a shame! I'll not do it!" I cried.

"Neither will I!" shouted James, as his father stood nonplussed at our defiance. "I'm your son, but I'm ashamed of it! Just because we're boys, you think you can make us do anything. Even though I am your son, I'll not be guilty of that!" James was almost in tears, pointing, as he spoke, at the huge rock which his father held uplifted, ready to dash it down the well.

He hardly had ceased speaking before his father, now thoroughly enraged, dropped the rock into the well and ran toward the wagon. Pulling out the blacksnake from the wagon bed, he ran after us. We were retreating slowly, for we had guessed his purpose; when he turned from the wagon, doubt left us and we took to our heels and ran. The long, tapering



"He dashed rock after rock into the well."

rawhide swirled in the air and cracked like the report of a pistol as he played it back and forth, dangerously near our backs.

I knew nothing would stay his hand until he had done us bodily harm, unless we could escape. We were both thin and all muscle, and we were accustomed to feats of endurance. The man was no match for us. Soon winded, he gave up the chase. Shaking his fist at us, he turned back to the well and resumed his task.

We watched as he continued his labors, helpless to prevent the outrage. His massive figure stood out against the sky line like some viking giant. The wind was blowing a gale. His mop of sandy hair stood almost upright, while his long red beard blew about wildly as he dashed rock after rock into the well.

At last, tired of the task and realizing that the well practically was ruined, he picked up the crowbar and walked wearily toward the shack, which he entered. We knew there was nothing left in it, except the straw we had dumped from the mattress, so what kept him there we could not imagine.

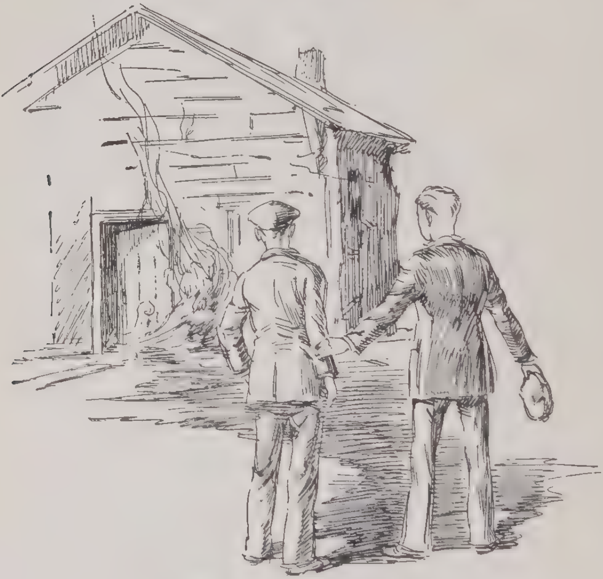
Soon he ran out and jumped into the wagon, laying the blacksnake upon the flanks of the poor horses, which, in terror, dashed down the road. We watched the maddened team make toward home, my stepfather standing up in the wagon, crackling the rawhide over the heads of the frightened animals.

"He's crazy!" I exclaimed.

"Look! Look!" gasped James, suddenly grasping me by the sleeve and turning me toward the shack from which my stepfather had just emerged.

It was a blaze of flame! He had set fire to the pile of straw which we had dumped from the mattress.

It already was growing dusk and the wind had not subsided, as it usually does in this country, with the setting of the sun. It was blowing directly from the northwest. Soon the shack was nothing but a pile of ashes; but before we realized it, the fire had crept along the short grass around the flimsy structure and had set fire to the hay and straw stacks near the barn. As we ran toward the blaze we saw that it had spread until the prairies were burning many yards behind the barn.



"The shack was a blaze of flame."

We had nothing with which to fight the fire but our bare hands. Fortunately, the prairie grass was short; but we knew that with the high wind blowing, it would not be long before miles and miles of prairie would be nothing but a blackened waste.

Darkness descended, but the light from the prairie fire lit up the heavens. Ever wider and wider grew the path of the fire as it swept onward in its devastating march. We were helpless. We could do nothing but watch the spread of the flames.

Away to the south, we saw a sudden glow and knew that the fire had reached the unthreshed grain stacks of Ole Olsen. To the east, likewise, we saw the reddening of the sky and we knew that my stepfather's crony, Sam Rounds, would be unable this year to pay his debt.

One after another, we watched the neighboring stacks and outbuildings go up in flames. We could discern the dim outlines of the alarmed settlers, set off in silhouette by the flames of the raging fire as, with covered brooms wet with water, they vainly tried to beat the fire out of the burning grass.

Here and there, we saw a settler suddenly revealed by the light of the fire, madly urging on a yoke of cattle in a wild endeavor to stop the progress of the flames by plowing up the sod around stacks and buildings. But the fire had gained too much headway, and in spite of all such efforts it jumped the newly-broken sod, licking up all it could devour. Soon houses, barns, stacks, and the dim forms of the frantic farmers were blotted out by darkness. In the far distance, an army-line of twinkling lights that hugged the ground was all that was left to reveal the onward march of the Dakota settler's most dreaded enemy — the relentless prairie fire.

Heartsick, dismayed, and thoroughly frightened, we turned our steps homeward; but as we reached Frayden's Folly we were afraid to enter the house. We slipped stealthily into the barn and made for ourselves a bed in one of the mangers. After a restless hour of worry, we both fell into a troubled sleep to the rhythm of the cattle's heavy breathing.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MY STEPFATHER'S NARROW ESCAPE

EARLY the next morning, with aching bones and eyes heavy with sleep, we emerged from our manger bed, hair and clothing covered with hay, like two young tramps. Throwing open the barn door and letting in the cool, fresh air of the early October morning, we looked anxiously toward the house that loomed large in the half-light of the autumn dawn. The events of the previous night seemed like a frightful dream; but before us to the east, as far as the eye could reach, there stretched a land as black as the now disappearing night. It seemed that while we slept some evil genie must have been at work, pouring over the country the contents of a giant ink bottle.

Here and there we could see the settlers' houses standing out in the isolation of stark nakedness, stripped of the surrounding protection of barns, sheds, and stacks. No sign of life was in evidence. Not a single column of smoke arose from the stovepipe chimneys of the farmers' sod houses. Above this scene of desolation the sun slowly rose, a flaming red ball floating in a crimson mist that seemed like an angry portent of further disaster.

James looked at me, his face white and pinched. We both were trembling from head to foot, and it was not from the chill of the early October dawn.

"This settles it! I'm going!" James said, his voice breaking.

"What do you mean?" I asked in alarm.

"Do you think I'm going to put up with this any longer? Father must be crazy! The settlers will make it hot for him, you better believe. I don't want to be around when it happens, either."

Throwing himself upon a pile of hay, the boy burst into tears and sobbed as if his heart would break. Putting my arm about his neck, I cried with him.

Looking back over the years, I now can read the heart of this freckled-faced boy, who suffered agonies of disappointment in the father who had promised so much to him. After his early years in a public institution, the promised deliverance and the finding of a new home must have been a godsend to him. But the few months of happiness quickly had spent themselves. Every day on the Dakota plains brought to him a new disappointment in the father he thought he had found. At first, he tried not to show his feelings; but, little by little, he had been forced to acknowledge his father's shortcomings, and now the crisis had been reached.

"Don't leave me, James!" I implored. "Where will you go? What will you do? William's gone and I'll be all alone!"

"You'll go too, sooner or later," James replied, rising from the hay and stifling his sobs. "Better come with me now, Don. Won't you?"

"N-no. I don't know what I want to do. I hate to leave Aunt Mary and the girls, and mother — you know I'm 'fraid mother's sick. I don't like the way she looks."

Although this was all true, there were other reasons why I shrank at the thought of leaving home and going out into the world alone. With the exception of the few days I had spent at the minister's house, when helping with the well, I never had been away from home over night. The thought of going out into the unknown, where I should be entirely dependent upon myself, terrified me. I wondered how William had had the courage to do it and I trembled as I thought of the prospect that faced James.

"Well, I'm going anyway," my stepbrother replied defiantly. "Yes, and going right now before the folks are up. I'll have to get something to eat first and I ought to take some grub with me, I suppose," he continued, as we walked slowly toward the house.

Silently we crept into the kitchen. I could not eat, but James helped himself to what he could find; and then, having had his fill, he packed a lunch, wrapped it up in a towel, and, with a few clothes which I smuggled from his room while he was eating, he started for the door.

"Goodby, Don! You've been a real brother to me and I'll never forget you!"

In a second, he was out of the door. I followed him around the house, and then, even as William had done, he turned down the road leading to the west and started on his long journey.

James was a year older than I. We had grown to love each other. To lose him as well as my own brother meant an added burden on my young shoulders. Not only would I miss him, but the brunt of the work about the farm would now fall upon me; for I could expect little assistance from my gentleman stepfather.

I watched James as he disappeared into the distance and out of my life. Many, many years have passed since that blackened morning, but never since have I seen the boy who shared with me my early confidences. Later I heard, indirectly, of his being on the Pacific coast; then came rumors of his presence on the Atlantic seaboard, and the next we heard was that he had been seen in Alaska; but not one word did we ever have from him directly.

Shep, who had kept us company in the barn all night and who was now seated on his haunches beside me, seemed to realize that something unusual was taking place. Lifting his head, he howled as James gradually disappeared from our sight.

"There, there, Shep," I said. "It can't be helped. You've still got me." I hugged the faithful dog, while he, in turn, tried to comfort me by licking my hands and face.

As I turned toward the house, I heard a stir in the kitchen, and peering through the door, saw the white face of Aunt Mary.

"O, Don!" she called. "Where have you been? We couldn't sleep last night, we were so worried about you. Are you all right? Where have you been? Oh, I wish I never had come to this horrible country! Something always is happening. Your mother was sick all through the night. Been out of her head. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Of course, but —" I could not finish my sentence for the tears that would not be denied as I thought of the future without James.

"What is the matter? Is it your stepfather? The brute! He ought to be strung up! He came home last night in a rage, shouting like a madman and driving your poor mother in terror out of doors. She wandered round the prairies until midnight. When she did come back, she had a high fever and was delirious. We put her to bed, but since then she hasn't known any of us. Where were you and James, and what were you doing?"

I told her of our experience the night before, of how we had slept in the barn, and that James had just left home.

"It's a cruel shame!" she cried. "Poor James, I am glad for his own sake that he has gone. Your stepfather is no better to his own son than he is to you."

"Is he still mad? Do you suppose it is safe for me to show myself?" I questioned.

"Safe!" Like an animal ready to fight for its young, the timid woman showed the rage of a lioness at the thought of Alexander Frayden doing me bodily harm. "Let him dare to touch you! Come on in and I'll have some breakfast in a few minutes. He's quieted down all right. Guess he realized what a terrible thing he'd done before he went to bed last night. He watched the fire late into the night, but we didn't know he was responsible for it," my aunt explained.

Soon the family were up and about, with the exception of my mother, whom I could hear piteously raving in her delirium. Evidently my stepfather had been cowed by the result of his deed, for he said nothing to me until he noticed the absence of James.

"Where is James?" he asked, turning toward me as we sat down at the breakfast table.

I never had lied to my stepfather and he knew it. Despite his unreasonableness toward all of us, he had implicit faith in my word and at times seemed genuinely appreciative of my efforts to please him. I was afraid to answer him, but I could not evade the question I knew not how to answer.

"Where is James?" he repeated.

I hung my head.

"Don, look at me! That's better; now answer me. Where is James?"

Looking him squarely in the face, I stammered, "I don't know."

"When did you see him last, and where were you last night?"

"We slept in the barn; we were afraid to come into the house," I replied.

"And James?"

"He left an hour ago. Said he was going away, he didn't know where. Said he couldn't — couldn't —"

"Go on!" urged my stepfather, his face white with apprehension.

"He — said he couldn't stand it to have his own father abuse him. He said it hurt to see us all made so miserable and —"

"Yes, go on!"

"He said you left him and Jennie alone in an orphan asylum a year at a time and never went to see them; but, when he came to live with us he thought everything would be changed and that he would have a — a real father and —"

"Yes, yes, go on!" commanded the man whose heartstrings I was twisting. Head down, with fork hanging between his limp fingers, he gazed into his plate as if for the first time he saw, in a magic mirror, the reflection of his own soul.

"James said he'd rather be in an orphan asylum than stay here any longer; and now that you've filled up Horton's well and set the prairie afire, he says the settlers won't stand for it and that he don't want to be 'round when — when they get after you!" I ended with considerable emphasis.

As I spoke about filling up the well and setting the prairie afire, Jennie and sister Irene and Aunt Mary sat up as if electrified, while my stepfather, suddenly aroused from his introspection, now looked thoroughly alarmed. Without a word, he pushed his chair back from the breakfast table and strode out of the room.

In the meantime my mother, still delirious, had dressed herself, and now, with her grey hair hanging down her back, she appeared before us. Her eyes were glazed and wild-looking and her cheeks ablaze with fever. Before we could stop her, she opened the kitchen door. Suddenly catching sight of the blackened prairies, she raised her arms above her head and in a loud voice gave vent to the lamentation prompted by her disordered senses.

"'A land of desolation and abomination! In my house is neither bread nor clothing; Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen. Howl ye; for the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. Behold the day of the Lord cometh cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate. How hast thou fallen from Heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!'"

Quoting at random, passages from Isaiah, she stood in the doorway like some ancient prophetess. We were terrified, as we realized that reason had fled. I tugged at her skirts, trying to pull her back into the house; but with a wild scream she fled, running in the direction of the burned prairies, her arms still raised as in condemnation, her cries echoing back to us and driving terror into our hearts.

My stepfather, now thoroughly alarmed, joined us in pursuit of my distracted mother. I soon outdistanced the others, but before I could reach mother she stumbled and fell. Lifting her head tenderly I half-raised her from the ground and, with the aid of my stepfather, helped her to arise. It was only after much effort that we succeeded in inducing her to return to the house.

Alexander Frayden, who had dabbled in medicine, now fully realized the danger that threatened. Unable to quiet her, he finally administered a sleeping potion.

"She may be better when she awakes, Don," he said, with a new note of feeling in his voice. "I will send Jennie and your sister to town for a doctor."

There were no telephones in those days and the only way to summon the nearest doctor, thirty miles away, was by messenger. The two girls were soon on their way to Center Town.

Alexander Frayden hovered about my mother's bed, evidently much alarmed about her condition, and, at the same time, manifesting every evidence of having been grievously injured by the desertion of James. To have William, his stepson, leave home had been a different matter. He now was placed in the position of driving his own son away, — ample proof that he had been the aggressor in the quarrel with William.

Though frightened by my mother's condition, I was yet more concerned at the thought of the settlers venting their wrath upon us as the result of my stepfather's action in destroying Horton's well and in setting the prairie afire. All morning long I scanned the prairies with the field glasses. Far to the south, I saw several teams drive up to Jameson's sod house. To the west I spied another team driving in the same direction, and from the east, still another one. I was satisfied that the neighbors were now thoroughly aroused and that they were consulting with Jameson, one of the more prominent settlers of the township.

About ten o'clock, as I emerged from the barn, my chores finished, Violet Rounds dropped from her pony almost into my arms, and both of us toppled to the ground. Struggling to my feet, I attempted to help her, but she needed no assistance from me.

"Silly!" she laughed, as she noticed my confusion. "Say something!" she demanded, as I stood speechless.

I could not have said anything had the world come to an end that minute.

"Don!" she cried, "Jameson was over to our place before sunup and he says the settlers are gathering to trace the origin of the fire. He says they believe that your stepfather must have started it, and if they find he did, they are going to resort to desperate measures. Jameson tried to make father commit himself in some way, but he knew nothing and did the best he could to make them think so. They intend to trace every yard of the fire. Father said I had better come over and warn you. He didn't dare to for fear of being suspected."

"I was afraid of that," I answered. And then I told her all about our experience the previous night.

"They'll make it hot for him, all right," she said. "I better be going or they will wonder what I am doing here."

"You're a brick, Vi!" I said, as I endeavored to help her mount.

With a wave of her hand, she was off. I continued to work about the yard and stables, my mind preoccupied with all that had befallen us, wondering what the settlers would do were they to fasten the guilt for the fire upon my stepfather. About noon, I noticed a cloud of dust on the south road and I knew that the settlers were headed for Frayden's Folly. The settlers either were ready to act on their suspicion of my stepfather's responsibility for the fire or else they were investigating the source of the fire. The latter seemed more probable. From time to time, the teams turned from the road and followed the blackened edge of the fire-swept prairies, scanning the ground for possible evidences of incendiarism. Suddenly the teams turned in the direction of John Horton's claim. For a second my heart seemed to stop. I knew they could not fail to find the evidence they were seeking.

Through the field glasses I could make out every figure. They gathered around the pile of ashes that once was the frame shack my stepfather had built. One of them stooped and picked up some object which was handed around from one to another. What it was I could not determine, but it seemed to cause much excitement. A few of them had gone to the well, probably to water their horses. Across the prairies came the sound of their strident voices as they discovered that the well was choked with rocks. This alone was sufficient to convict Alexander Frayden; for, by this time, it must have become known that he had lost the contest against Horton. Further, it was very evident that the fire had made its beginning there, for the grass had been burned on only one side of the shack and the fire had traveled with the prevailing wind, which had been from the northwest.

Beside myself with fear, I ran into my mother's room, where I found my stepfather seated beside her bed, with his head bowed and resting in his hands.

"Quick!" I cried. "The settlers are coming — they'll be here in half an hour! They are at Horton's now!"

"Where shall I go?" my stepfather asked weakly, as he followed me out of doors and to the barn.

"Aunt Mary, don't tell them where he is!" I called, as we hurried out of the house.

As already explained, we had succeeded in sinking one well on Frayden's Folly, finding about three feet of water at a depth of sixty feet. The labor of pulling up sufficient water for the stock from such a depth was so great that we had rigged up a derrick-like arrangement, by which a large bucket could be filled and drawn up by a horse. I had been engaged in drawing water for the stock and had just completed my task, when I discovered the little group making ready to leave Horton's claim. I had not unhitched the horse I had been using, but had left it standing at the well while I ran to warn my stepfather.

"You must hide somewhere!" I said.

"But there is no place to hide where they cannot find me," he whined.

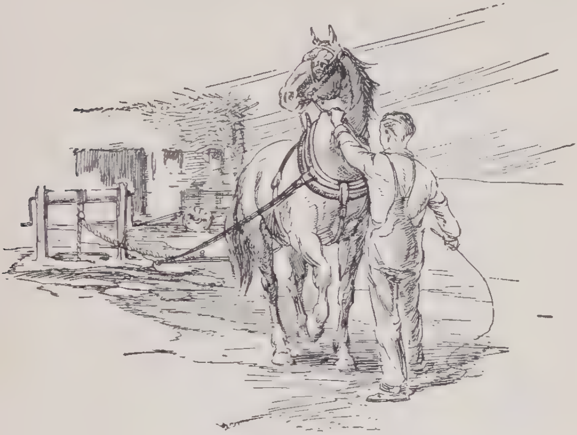
It is pitiable how helpless a strong man can be in times of bodily danger, and it is equally amazing how meekly a thoroughly cowed man sometimes will look to a mere lad for guidance. Here was my stepfather, who had kept us all in a constant state of intimidation, now appealing to me for advice and protection!

"The well!" I exclaimed. The thought came to me as I noticed the horse patiently waiting to be unharnessed. "I will lower you in the bucket. When you get to the bottom, you can step out and stand in the water. It's cold, but it isn't deep. You can't stay in the bucket, because they might want to water their horses and you would be discovered."

Alexander Frayden turned pale with fright at the thought of being lowered to the bottom of the sixty-foot well. Not once, while we were digging it, had he ventured to descend. To one who never has had the experience, it is indeed a feat that takes courage. To feel one's self going down and down; to see only a small aperture above growing smaller and smaller while the light becomes fainter and fainter; and to peer down into an unfathomable darkness, — this takes a courage that few possess. To know that only a rope stands between you and eternity and that the slightest carelessness might jerk the handle of the windlass out of the hands of those above, which would mean almost certain death, is enough to daunt the stoutest heart. Having experienced these feelings, I did not scorn my stepfather's fear.

"There is no danger," I urged; "at least not so much as there may be if the settlers find you."

Alexander Frayden hesitated; but only for a fraction of a moment, for he heard the rumbling of the wagons drawing nearer and nearer. The horse was hitched to the end of the rope holding the bucket. I stretched the rope taut by walking the horse as far from the well as the rope would allow. My stepfather climbed into the bucket, steadying himself as he did so by grasping the end of the well-curbing that projected above the ground. Foot by foot, I backed up the horse as I watched my stepfather, standing in the bucket and clinging to the rope, gradually disappear below the surface. Once, the horse backed more suddenly than I intended him to do, and I knew the sudden releasing of the rope must have scared my stepfather. I was still boy enough to be unable to resist the temptation of giving him an additional



"Foot by foot, I backed up the horse."

scare or two. It was not long, however, before the rope slackened and I knew he had reached the bottom.

"All right?" I called.

"Y-e-s!" echoed up from the depths of the well. "The water's awfully cold, though."

I started the horse forward. "Don't pull the bucket up!" my stepfather shouted in alarm.

"I must!" I replied. "They'd suspect something if I left it down. Don't say a word until I call you, but if I let the bucket down again, catch it and fill it with water and let it come up again. They may want to water their horses. Quick, they are coming!" I suddenly yelled.

The well was shielded from the view of the excited farmers, as the depression in the prairies in which the well was located hid it from the sight of travelers approaching from the east until they were almost upon it. Having drawn up the bucket, I had barely time enough to unhitch the horse and stable it before I heard the crunching wheels of the wagons rolling into the barnyard.

Grabbing a pitchfork, I became busy cleaning out the barn.

"Hello! Hello!" I heard one of the settlers call, as one by one the teams drove up in front of the barn. I faced the delegation with pitchfork in hand, striving hard to conceal my agitation, although, for the moment, I was too weak from fright to speak. Jumping from his wagon, Ole Olsen, a Swede, who, I knew, had been burned out by the fire the previous night, approached me in what I thought was a very belligerent attitude.

"Whar are de ol' man?" he shouted at me.

"He's not here," I managed to reply, trying to justify the evasion to my conscience. He was not on the spot or above the surface of the ground, so my statement literally was true, although a subterfuge.

"He ban an' yumped Horton's claim but he losed the contes', darn heem!" Olsen yelled excitedly, shaking his huge fist in my face.

"Let the boy alone, Ole," spoke up Jameson, who had been especially bitter toward my stepfather because of his opposition to the building of a schoolhouse. Jameson had a large family of growing children and he had been very anxious to have a schoolhouse erected without further delay. He was a kindly Scot, well thought of by all of the settlers.

"You know, Don," he went on, "we don't love your stepfather over-much, and I, for one, intend to see that he gets justice. He contested Horton's claim and that was a dirty shame, but, thank the Lord, Horton won after all. I suppose that made the old man so mad he filled up the well on Horton's claim with rocks. If he didn't do it, who did?"

"Yes, who did?" echoed another farmer by the name of Swain. "There's no one in the township that had any reason for doing such a dastardly deed, excepting your stepfather."

"Did he do it, boy?" suddenly asked another settler, John Flight, who had been opposed to my stepfather's educational policies.

"Yes!" I answered, determined to stick to the truth as long as I could. The fact could not be concealed, for no one in the township had had a grievance against John Horton, excepting Alexander Frayden.

"We knew it," echoed several of the farmers.

"Where is James?" John Flight asked.

"Ran away from home this morning," I answered.

"Yim yumped out!" exclaimed Olsen. "By golly! He ban no yip of the ol' block!"

"It's a shame the way that man treats his family.

He ought to be strung up, or driven out of the country," Swain declared.

"Did your stepfather set fire to the prairie, too?" suddenly demanded Jameson.

"I didn't see him!" I answered stubbornly.

"Where were you and James when your stepfather filled up the well?" asked Jameson, trying hard not to characterize the head of Frayden's Folly in the terms in which he thought of him.

Seeing it was impossible to evade further questioning, I told of Alexander Frayden's return home the previous day; of how he had compelled us to go over to Horton's, and how he had tried to make James and me help him fill up the well. I told of our quarrel and how he had chased us both with a blacksnake; of our night in the barn; how James had gone; and, finally, of my mother's illness.

"Shame! Shame!" Jameson exclaimed. "And to think that we stand for a man that treats his family like that. The poor woman! I'm sorry for your mother, Don. We've got to get to the bottom of this fire, though. Did you see any fire while you were on the place?"

"No!" I answered truthfully, "not while he was on the place, either. James and I were afraid of him and so we made tracks for home and he must have finished with the well, because we saw him going home in the wagon before we left."

All this was true; the fire had not shown itself until after my stepfather had left the place and after we, too, had crossed the road and were on the land of Frayden's Folly.

"Did you ever see this before?" Jameson asked, handing me a knife which I instantly recognized as one belonging to my stepfather.

"Yes," I replied; "it belongs to him."

"I thought so. I've seen him with it," answered Jameson. "Do you know how it happened that there is no sign of the stove or any metal in the ashes where the shack stood?" he asked.

"He made us take everything out of the shack and load it into the wagon," I answered, before I realized that this confession directly incriminated my stepfather. I must have looked the dismay I felt as I became aware that I had unwittingly betrayed him.

"I see it all, now," said Jameson. "He wanted to save the things and he had it in mind all the time to burn the shack he had built. He probably set it afire, never thinking of the danger of setting the prairie afire."

Jameson then told me of the great damage the fire had done in the township. Settler after settler had lost hay and grain stacks and every stick of timber and every frame shack or barn that stood in the path of the fire, and much live stock had perished. The farmers were in a mood to make it hot for the incendiary, whoever he might be.

"Th' ol' man he ban 'round har, somewhars!" spoke up Olsen.

"Let's look 'round a bit," Flight suggested.

They entered the barn.

"A team's gone, and so is the buggy," Jameson said, "so I guess the boy's not lying."

"Mother's very sick, I told you. She's delirious. They've gone for the doctor," I replied.

They searched every nook and cranny of the barn and outbuildings and the shed. They explored the cyclone cellar and then started for the house.

"S'pose he's driven your mother half crazy with his antics," Swain said. "He drove your own brother away from home and now it's his own son. Fine father, that! Isn't a better woman in the country than your mother, boy!"

Aunt Mary, pale from fright, met us at the door.

"Good morning, ma'am," said Jameson sheepishly, holding his cowboy hat in his hand. "Don tells us his mother's very ill."

"Yes, sir, the poor woman's crazed with trouble. That man will drive her to the grave or to the asylum, yet."

"I fully believe it, ma'am," replied Jameson. "You'll excuse us, ma'am, won't you, but we want to be sure Frayden's not on the place. May we go through the house?"

"Certainly, sir!" exclaimed Aunt Mary. "He's not in the house, I assure you! Please don't frighten my sister!"

Leading the way, I escorted the party, first into the cellar and then from room to room and up into the attic. Satisfied that he was not hidden in any of these places, Jameson finally said, "And now your mother's room, Don. Hate to do it, but we must."

Silently I led them downstairs and quietly opened the door of mother's room. Shamefaced, they stood in the doorway and peered into the darkened room. Half-stupefied by the drug my stepfather had administered, my mother lay moaning, muttering over and over again the words she had not ceased to utter since she first gazed upon the blackened prairies, — "Abomination of desolation — abomination of desolation!"

Fumbling with their hats, abashed in the presence of a heartbroken, delirious woman, they turned from the door. If anything further had been needed to stir their wrath against Alexander Frayden, it was the pitiful condition of my mother. As they filed out into the yard, I could hear more than one mutter an oath.

"Let's water the horses before we go," suggested one of the party.

I had anticipated this very thing. Afraid that their prying eyes might see something that would excite their suspicions and in mortal terror lest my stepfather should make a noise that would betray his presence, I suggested that I get the horse and fill the trough. Had I had time and presence of mind enough, I should have filled the trough before they arrived. However, I now ran to the barn and soon had the animal harnessed and at the well.

As the bucket disappeared into the well, I tried to engage the party in conversation, making an excuse to talk as loudly as possible as the windlass was creaking under the weight of the heavy bucket. I hoped my stepfather would hear and be warned that his trailers were waiting above. I let the bucket down as gently as possible, trusting that he would catch it and see that it was properly filled. I knew that he would have to crowd himself against the side of the well to permit the bucket to descend into the water. Attaching the end of the well-rope to the singletree, I led the horse away from the well, thus drawing up the heavy bucket, from which the water must have leaked and splashed down upon my stepfather's head. Repeating this operation several times, I soon had enough water drawn for all the teams.

"Goodby, Don," Jameson said, shaking me by the hand. "You deserve better treatment than you have been getting. Whenever *you* feel like running away from home, come over to my place."

"You bet he can have a job with me any time," echoed Flight.

I thanked them as well as I could. When they had turned their teams and driven away from Frayden's Folly, a great weight fell from my shoulders. It was some time, though, before I dared to call to my stepfather, as sound carries far in the rarefied atmosphere of the western plains. Indeed, I even unhitched the horse and led it into the barn to stand there until they were all out of sight.

Satisfied at last that all was safe, I brought out the horse again.

"Hello! It's all right now! They've gone!" I shouted down the well.

"Thank God!" I heard my stepfather reply in a weak voice. "Be quick, Don, I am nearly frozen in this water."

I let down the bucket as carefully as I could and soon had the assurance that he was ready; again hitching the rope to the singletree, I led the horse away from the well. In a few minutes I saw my stepfather's bushy red hair appear above the well-curbing. In a second more he was clambering over the curbing, his shoes covered with clay, his clothes wringing wet. His legs and feet were numb from the cold, and even with my help he could hardly walk to the house. He shivered with a chill and his teeth chattered. A more pitiable object I had never seen than this arrogant stepfather of mine whose dignity and pride so suddenly had fled.

Seeing my proud stepfather's discomfiture and fright, I had tried to make myself believe that I was glad to have him experience a little of the suffering and terror that he had entailed upon us all, but I could not. Indeed, I was sorry for the man. I felt humiliated to have witnessed his humiliation and my heart was full of sympathy for him.

Having taken a drink of "pain-killer," a hot decoction of his own preparation which he always kept on hand, he changed his garments. I suggested that I rub his limbs with the "pain-killer," to which he consented. Soon the circulation again was active and I was satisfied he would be none the worse for his adventure.

"Thank you, Don. You are a good boy," he said.

This was the only word of commendation he ever had given me. I wondered if the lesson he had received during the past twenty-four hours might not make a change in the man for all time to come.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ALONE AT FRAYDEN'S FOLLY

It was the next morning before the doctor arrived. Not knowing the circumstances that had caused my mother's condition, it was difficult for him to diagnose the case. He knew, of course, that she must have been subject to some mental upheaval, as the symptoms were not merely those of an ordinary fever. Alexander Frayden made no attempt to enlighten the doctor. It was all that Aunt Mary could do to refrain from expressing herself, but she was not given the opportunity of being alone with the doctor.

"She needs complete rest, of course," the doctor said, "but she must also have freedom from whatever it is that is causing this condition. Remove the cause! Remove the cause! That is, if you know what it is," he concluded, giving my stepfather a significant look. "If she doesn't soon fall into a natural sleep or become mentally composed in an hour or two, I had better stay overnight," he added.

"Where did you leave the girls?" my stepfather inquired of the doctor.

"In town. They had some shopping they wanted to do. As they said the case was urgent, I hurried on ahead."

My stepfather and Aunt Mary both seemed disturbed at the girls' continued absence. I had a suspicion that they would not come and I ventured to express it to Aunt Mary.

"Why, where would they go?" she asked. "They know no one in Center Town and there is no place for them to go. Goodness knows, I wish they could find some decent place so they wouldn't have to be continually under the thumb of that stepfather of yours! Wish I had never come to this terrible country!" she added, beginning to pace the floor, as she usually did when excited.

"They won't come back, you'll see," I persisted.

"What makes you think the girls won't come back?" Aunt Mary asked.

"Because Irene told me that if she ever got the chance to go to town, she would try and get a position, — anything to get away from here, and —"

"Well?" urged my aunt.

"Jennie is going to marry John Horton. He is staying in Center Town now, and I bet she will marry him at once."

"What! Jennie marry John Horton?" exclaimed Aunt Mary in surprise.

"Yes, marry John Horton," I answered. "I suppose Jen won't care if I do tell now, because I am sure that's what she has done, and if it's done, it can't be undone."

"What do you mean? Stop talking in riddles, Don," chided my aunt, now thoroughly bewildered.

I told her what I knew of Horton's courtship.

"Now that he's won back his claim, there's no reason why they shouldn't get married. They probably will think it a good joke on the head of the family," I added.

The idea struck my aunt as funny indeed. "Won't her father be angry when he hears of it? Serves him right! I hope she does it. John Horton's a fine young man. The neighbors will be tickled, too, to know that he not only defeated your stepfather, but took his daughter away from him. I don't wish any one harm, I'm sure," Aunt Mary continued apologetically, "but it would be a righteous retribution if Alexander Frayden's daughter married the man he tried to wrong."

I could see that my stepfather was worried by the girls' failure to return home. In the afternoon, I drove over to Pembroke for the mail. There I found a letter for my stepfather that I knew was from his daughter. I also found one for myself from sister Irene. Opening it, I saw that my surmise had been correct. Jennie had married John Horton the previous evening. "Regarding myself," Irene wrote, "I have a position in one of the stores here. A queer thing, perhaps, for a daughter of a Deen to do, but family pride, I guess, is one thing and self-respect another."

How could I blame Irene? I was afraid, however, that if mother discovered that Irene was gone her recovery might be retarded.

On my return home, I handed my stepfather the papers and with them the letter from Jennie. I watched him as he read the letter. His cheeks flushed with anger, and without a word he put the letter into his pocket, pretending to look over the papers I had brought from the post office. I could see, however, that he was not reading. I had never known him to appear quite so depressed.

"Don," he said, as he gave up his attempt at reading, "I wish you would go over to Flight's and get that plow they borrowed last week. I am going over to see brother Rounds."

His purpose in going to see Rounds was not apparent to any of us, but obediently I hitched up the team and started on my errand. On my return I was surprised to learn that William had been at Frayden's Folly.

"William wants me to come and live with him, Don," Aunt Mary said. "He was over here while you were away. He was at Austin's and saw your stepfather pass on his way to Rounds' so he took the opportunity of running over here."

"And — leave me and — mother, alone with him?" I faltered.

"I'm not going, Don, so don't be alarmed; at least, I'll not go so long as you remain."

The doctor watched patiently beside my mother's bed. The day passed and another night wore away and still he kept his faithful vigil, relieved now and then by my stepfather and Aunt Mary. The fever had died down and yet none of us could sleep. Morning finally came and with it the crisis to which the doctor had been looking forward with much concern. Rising from my mother's bedside, he turned to my stepfather with a hopeless look.

"I can't give her the care she needs now. You must take her to a sanitarium where she can have immediate help. With proper treatment, I know she will be herself again, but I will not be responsible if you do not act upon my advice," warned the doctor.

After much discussion between them which I did not hear, it was decided that mother was to be removed to a private hospital in the East.

"Don," said my stepfather, after breaking the news to me, "it's the only thing that will save your mother's reason. You must be a man, though, and do your part. She cannot stay alone there, and your aunt will have to accompany us."

"Do you mean I'll have to stay here all alone?" I asked in sudden terror.

"I am afraid you will, Don. The stock has to be taken care of. Besides, I can't afford to take you with us. The expense is going to be very heavy and — I'll have to mortgage the farm to be able to give your mother the treatment she needs. She'll have it, never fear, if we lose everything."

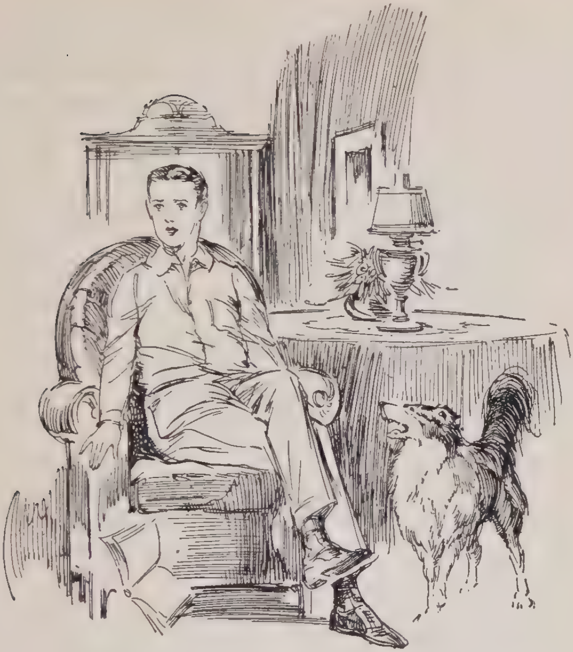
I never have forgotten this evidence of his regard for my mother. There was a strange mixture of tenderness and harshness wrapped up in this man which I never have been able to comprehend.

The prospect of being left in the shell of a house we called home, three miles and a half from the nearest settler, struck me with dismay. The greater fear that came with a knowledge of my mother's danger, however, gave me courage to assist in the preparation for her departure.

It was decided to take the lumber wagon rather than the buggy, as a bed could be made for mother in it. At last the hour for their departure came. Against her will, mother had been dressed and carried out and tenderly laid upon the improvised bed in the bottom of the wagon box. A double wagon box had been decided upon, as the sides, rising an extra foot or two, would protect her from the wind. At Blunt they were to take a sleeper for Chicago. It would be fully two weeks before my stepfather could possibly return. It had been decided that Aunt Mary should remain with mother.

It was noon before they were ready to start. The fields were sere and the prairies brown and dull, while the burned-over section well represented the "desolation" my mother so vividly had pictured.

Tenderly I kissed her goodby, but the sobs I could not restrain were answered only by her meaningless laughter. I dared not watch them as they drove away. Hurrying into the barn, I buried myself in a pile of hay where I cried myself to sleep. It was Shep, licking my face, who wakened me to the realization that it was nearly dark, and that I was alone at last.



"Shivering with fright, I dropped my book."

I dared not think. There was much work to do before night, and so, with Shep at my side, I filled the mangers with hay, watered the stock, and milked the cow. Having finished my chores, I turned to the deserted, lonely house. I dreaded to enter it. Everything was in apple-pie order, as Aunt Mary always had kept it. The clock on the kitchen shelf ticked. The black cat lay curled on the oval rag rug before the stove, in which still smouldered the half-dried buffalo chips I had brought in from the barn that noon. It was not without a protest that Aunt Mary had left me, but mother's needs were so insistent and so much greater than my own that, assuming a courage I did not feel, I had assured her I should be all right until they returned.

Upon the shelves stood the four or five kerosene lamps, all filled and trimmed, ready for the night. Lighting them all, I carried one into mother's room, and another into the living room, and the others I distributed among the unoccupied chambers upstairs.

"It won't seem so lonesome, Shep," I explained to my only companion, who followed me from room to room. "Guess the neighbors will think we're having a party."

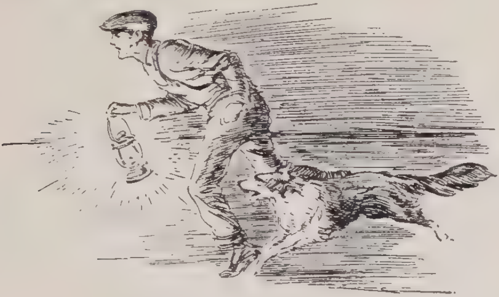
Shep and I ate our supper together. I washed the dishes and then tried to read; but with the increasing wind the house began to rock and sway, groaning with the creaking of its timbers, so that I could not fix my mind upon the book.

I thought I heard a step on the stair. Shivering with fright, I dropped my book. A loose board in the floor of the room above creaked. Now I was certain someone was upstairs.

"Coward!" I exclaimed, in disgust with myself, as I jumped from my chair. "Come on, Shep, we'll show him there's no one there!"

Lamp in hand, I mounted the stairs, Shep following close at my heels. The lights I had placed upstairs still were burning and no one was in evidence. Reassured, I sat down to my book again, but I could not read.

"Guess I'll sleep in mother's bed, Shep," I announced. Leaving all the lamps burning, I undressed and crept into bed; Shep lay down on the floor, beside the bed. Sleep would not come. The wind was blowing a gale and the house shivered and shook. I heard the clock strike ten and then eleven, and when midnight struck I was still wide awake. Suddenly something blew against the outside door. Jumping out of bed in fright, I managed to dress, evidently to Shep's surprise, for I had roused him from a sound sleep. Going to the door, I opened it cautiously, but I could see nothing. Impenetrable darkness confronted me.



"I ran out into the night, Shep at my heels."

I was convinced that there was not another human being within miles of Frayden's Folly, and yet an impalpable presence seemed to terrify me. Was the subconscious mind in which I lived so much of the time in touch with spiritual forces I could feel but not see? At any rate, the desire for contact with some form of material life suddenly overwhelmed me.

I could not bring myself to stay in the house any longer. The very walls seemed to speak; the air of the rooms was heavy, and I longed for the companionship of even the animals in the barn.

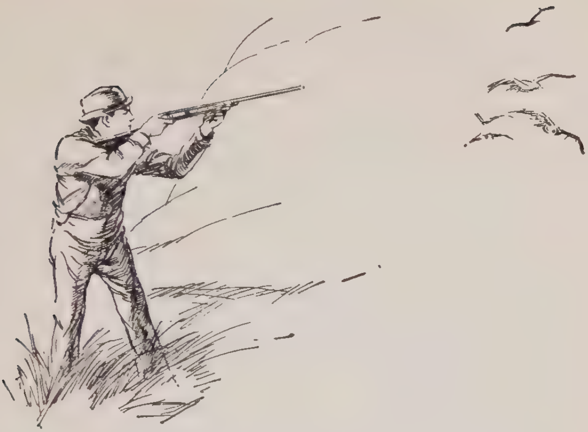
"Come on, Shep," I called, "we'll sleep in the barn."

With lighted lantern in hand, I ran out into the night, Shep at my heels. Frayden's Folly loomed up above me on its hill of arrogance, a sickly yellow light leering out of each of its windows from the kerosene lamps I had left burning, advertising to all the countryside, as it seemed to me, that its mistress had gone. The light from one lone star penetrated the darkness about me. Not a flicker of light came across the blackened prairies from the distant sod houses of the settlers.

Closing my eyes, I plunged forward at a dead run into the night. I stumbled. I fell. The lantern went out, but I held fast to it as I rolled down a little embankment in front of the barn door. I groped in my pocket for a match and soon had the lantern burning again and the barn door open. A great feeling of relief came over me as I found myself among the cattle chewing their cuds and the horses munching their hay. I made a bed for myself and for Shep in one of the mangers, as James and I had once done. Soon I was fast asleep. From that night, until my stepfather's return, I made my bed in the barn.

Going to the house early the next morning, I opened the door only to be confronted by a cloud of choking smoke. The oil in every lamp had burned out, and the heavy smoke from the smouldering wicks had filled all the rooms in the house. It was with much difficulty that I succeeded in opening the windows and in getting the house thoroughly aired and the soot cleaned from the places upon which it had lodged.

One morning, as I was working about the barn, I heard the booming of prairie chickens. The sound came from the north, in which direction the prairie fire had not spread. I promised myself that as soon as I finished the chores I would go in search of the covey, but it was not until the next morning that I recalled the incident. Again, from the distance, came the strange booming noise peculiar to the prairie cock. I took the shotgun and started in pursuit, leaving the chores to await my return. Shep I had left shut up in the barn, fearing that he might scare the birds.



"With one shot I brought down two hens."

The sun was just making its appearance. The prairie grass, wet with a heavy dew, sparkled in the early light of morning like a million crystal blades. Already there was a tang in the air that threatened frost. I filled my lungs again and again with the exhilarating ozone, as I made my way in the direction from which had come the prairie cock's invitation to its mate. I walked a mile and a half before any further evidence of the birds' whereabouts presented itself. Suddenly a hen took to the air, and I dropped to the ground. Crawling on all fours, I mounted a hillock. Directly before me, across a little slough, was another similar rise in the ground. My attention was arrested by the strange performance of a covey of prairie chickens on the crest of this hillock.

Surrounded by eight or ten hens, several male birds strutted backward and forward, each one careful not to come in contact with the others. On each side of the male bird's neck, I noticed a strange pair of orange-colored bags, which Manfred later told me were inflated with air. They looked like little oranges or toy balloons. Drooping their wings on the ground like turkey gobblers, ruffling up their feathers, and blowing up the orange sacks, the male birds strutted back and forth to the great admiration of the hens, punctuating the performance by giving vent to the peculiar booming that had carried through the still morning air for a distance of nearly two miles.

I was so interested in the performance that I almost forgot the breakfast I had promised myself. As I arose from the grass, the birds took flight, and with one shot I brought down two hens. In less than an hour I was enjoying a feast from my early hunt.

How I got through the days that elapsed before my stepfather's return, I hardly know. I kept as busy as possible. There still was plowing to do and some corn to husk. This work, with the chores, made me a very tired boy when night came.

In the course of ten days, my stepfather returned. The doctors in Chicago reported that all mother needed was a complete change and a good rest. It was November before she and Aunt Mary returned, and it was weeks after that before she fully recovered her strength. There was a change in her, even then, that I could not fathom. Something seemed to have snapped within her. There was not the same interest manifested in the work about the place or in the neighbors' doings. She was more quiet and was possessed of a calm that, at times, seemed dangerous, as if she were checking forces that sought for expression.

In time, we told her of Irene's determination to remain away from home. This seemed to afford her more satisfaction than grief.

"It's the best thing for her, Don," she said to me one evening, as I took her for a stroll in the bracing November air. "I wish she were safely and happily married. I am glad she did as she did; glad William went; glad poor James went, and glad that Jennie is happy, but — you, Don. What about you? Are you going, too?"

"I don't know, mother. Not if you need me. Sometimes, I feel sorry for him," I said. "He hasn't been the same since James left nor since Jennie married."

"Yes, he spoke to me about that. He thinks a lot of you, Don, even if he doesn't show it. He is proud to think you stayed and yet hurt when he realizes that it was you instead of James. But what are you going to do with yourself?"

"I don't know, mother. I want to get an education. Sometimes I think I — I would like to be a minister, but —"

"God bless you, my son; you couldn't do anything that would make me happier."

"But — but when I see how he acts while professing to be sanctified and beyond sinning; when I see what an old hypocrite Sam Rounds is and —"

"Stop, Don. If all the church members in the world were hypocrites, it wouldn't change the truth."

"Yes, but if those who are supposed to be our leaders are not helped a little by their religion, it is hard to believe it will help any one," I argued.

"Nothing is so futile, Don, as to judge others when we do not and cannot know their circumstances, their environment, their early training, and, above all, their temptations. Perhaps, had it not been for their religion, they would have failed utterly; perhaps others would not have done so well. Every one is helped who seeks aid from God. Religion is only the search after God; the yearning to know Him and to be like Him. Belonging to a church does not mean we have attained perfection. God's church should be a hospital for sinners; it is for those who need healing, not alone for those who have been healed."

It was rarely that the opportunity of talking with mother about such things came to me. I was like a starved child, hungering for a mother's love and attention.

I soon learned that my stepfather had placed a mortgage upon the farm. Mother was heartsick over it, but there seemed to be no choice in the matter. Consequently, she accompanied him to town and signed the papers, although she felt that it was the beginning of the end.

We had little grain to sell. Money was needed to make payments on notes for machinery, if foreclosure was not to stare us in the face. There was no hard coal to burn during the coming winter, — in fact, not even soft coal, as there was no money with which to buy it. A long, hard winter threatened.

The tenth of November dawned with a raging blizzard filling the air with clouds of swirling snow. It was a cold and discouraged family that sat down to dinner that day at Frayden's Folly. Meat, there was none. Headcheese, brown bread without butter, weak tea without sugar or milk, constituted the repast for which we offered thanks. This was about the fare that followed during the succeeding days of that winter.

The cold kept us constantly busy stuffing hay into the wash boiler, which we then turned over the open top of the kitchen stove, igniting the hay to give us the only warmth we had. This fuel we supplemented with buffalo chips, which burned almost as rapidly as the hay. Fortunately, we had filled up a corner of the kitchen with a supply of hay, while a pile of chips rested against the outside of the house. Past experience had taught us to stretch a rope from the barn to the house, so that we could travel backward and forward without danger of being lost in a blizzard. One or two shovels also were kept on hand in the kitchen for emergencies.

Winter set in in earnest. It marked a change in the life of the family, but it was not long before my stepfather again became his old domineering and dictatorial self.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE SOUL OF MY MOTHER REVEALS ITSELF

It was natural that the settlers' ire against my stepfather should cool after their demonstration of wrath. Their bitterness had not lessened, but the desire to do him bodily harm evidently had been checked. It is true that a few of the hot-heads among the neighbors did hale him into court, but the evidence was not sufficient to hold him. Of course, it would have been easy to show the animus involved in the destruction of the well; but, simple as it seemed, it was not easy to prove that it was he who had burned the shack unless his own family were to testify against him. Fortunately, neither James nor I was called as a witness.

We both had wondered, at the time, why the man had not taken the shack apart and carried the lumber home. Our only solution of the problem was that his wrath had blinded him to the more obvious thing to do.

During the ten days that my stepfather had been away to take my mother to Chicago, not a neighbor had appeared in sight of Frayden's Folly. The work on the farm had kept me so busy that I had no time to visit the neighbors. The one Sunday I was alone found me so ill that I could hardly feed and water the stock, so I missed the opportunity of attending the usual Sabbath services. It was not until my stepfather's return that the settlers discovered that I had been left entirely alone on the farm. Great was their indignation when they learned the fact!

"Why, the boy might have starved to death," protested mother Rounds, when Violet told her of my experience.

There was not a farmer's family in the township that would not have welcomed me for my mother's sake, if for no other reason.

"We know we cannot punish Frayden without hurting your mother, Don," Jameson said to me one day at Pembroke, where I had gone to get the weekly mail. "If it weren't for her, we would drive the old man out of the country."

The romance of my stepsister's marriage to John Horton was another thing that held the settlers from carrying out their plans for revenge. Both Horton and Jennie, returning from their short honeymoon, urged the farmers to do nothing more to punish my stepfather. The neighbors were so elated at the outwitting of their opponent by his own daughter that it was not hard to persuade them to drop the matter.

The news of my sister's marriage to Horton preceded their home-coming. As an evidence of good-will, a number of farmers drove over to Horton's claim and made it their business to remove from the well the rocks my stepfather had thrown in to choke it. Some contributed lumber and building material, with which others erected a suitable house for the young couple. In every way possible, the neighbors did all within their power to show their pleasure at the outcome of the contest suit.

None of these activities were lost upon Alexander Frayden, as Horton's claim lay but half a mile east of us. Samuel Rounds also reported faithfully to my stepfather all the neighborhood gossip, but any mention of Jennie was silenced by her father immediately.

"Never speak her name in my presence again! She is no longer a daughter of mine!" he shouted across the supper table one evening.

"Shame on you, Alexander!" mother spoke up. "She is your daughter, and no matter what she has done, you cannot change that fact. Being her father, you have a duty to her that you must not evade."

My stepfather was not a little taken aback by my mother's courageous rebuke. Indeed, this was the second time I had heard her take issue with him. It had its effect. Probably the knowledge of the crisis through which she had passed had something to do with quieting his anger; at any rate, although seeming to ignore what mother had said, he made his next remark in an entirely different tone.

"I'll not have her come here and I forbid any of you going over there."

"I doubt whether she wants to come here," mother answered; "but if she does, she will receive the welcome she deserves. She is not my own daughter, it is true, but she is a dear, sweet girl and I still have something to say about my own home," she continued bravely, her cheeks now aflame and courage fairly shining from her eyes.

I recognized the signs of revolt. Patience and kindliness often are mistaken by certain natures for marks of weakness. People like my mother will accept almost anything short of a direct insult rather than forfeit peace of mind; but there is a limit to their patience, and once that limit is reached, the tongue becomes a two-edged sword. To them, almost anything seems better than a resort to physical force, but, driven to an extremity, there is no personal danger they will not face in self-defense.

The limit of my mother's endurance of Alexander Frayden's temper had been reached. Not understanding her in this respect as did I, my stepfather continued to irritate her by his opposition, all thought of her mental condition gone from his mind for the moment.

"I say she shall not step foot into this house!" he yelled, rising from the table and striking it over and over again with his brawny fist.

Mother also arose and quietly faced him, looking directly into his eyes, until, quivering under her gaze, he lowered his head and would have turned from the table, had she not grasped his arm.

"We might as well understand each other, Alexander," she said, quietly yet deliberately. "I have given in to you on every occasion, often against my better judgment. I have been a loyal wife. Every dollar I possessed when I married you became yours and never have I questioned your disposition of it. You drove William away from me; you drove my own daughter from home; you drove your son from the house, and now you would wreck the life of your only daughter. For your sake, I will not let you do it. Jennie shall come here, if I have to go and bring her myself, and we will go over there just as often as we wish. That is understood."

Reaching up to him, she kissed him, and then quietly turned and left the room.

Amazed at my mother's audacity, probably alarmed at the note of danger that sounded with every word of her declaration of independence, and unmanned by the feminine touch of weakness shown by the kiss, Alexander Frayden left the house without a word.

Perhaps to prove her words, the very next day my mother called to me in his presence, "Come, Don, I want you to go with me to see Jennie."

I looked first at my stepfather, then at Aunt Mary, and back at my mother. Aunt Mary was trembling in anticipation of a scene, but my stepfather never raised his head from the paper he was reading.

Thus began our visits to my stepsister and her husband.

In time, mother prevailed upon Jennie to return with her for a visit to Frayden's Folly.

"He won't dare do anything, Jen," I urged, as she seemed reluctant to come. "He's afraid of the neighbors, and if they heard he ill-treated you, it would go hard with him, and he knows it. Besides, I think he's actually afraid of mother, now."

I told her how mother had defied him, and I explained for the first time how I had hidden her father at the bottom of the well so that he might escape the wrath of the settlers.

"You're a brave boy, Don," she said, kissing me. "To think that I have to be afraid of my own father! What a humiliation! And you, who owe him so little, have done so much for him and have been treated like a dog!"

"Wasn't anything," said I. "Come on home with us."

"I'll come," she said.

And so mother and I returned to Frayden's Folly with Jennie, each of us trembling inwardly, but determined, if necessary, to have it out once for all with the tyrant.

What was our surprise to see my stepfather greet his daughter as if she had not been away from home overnight. Who but God can understand the workings of the human mind — the springs of the heart?

"What did you do with that butcher knife, Jennie? I told you to put it back on the shelf the day you were using it. I haven't been able to find it since," he said.

"I'll get it, father," she cried, as she ran into the kitchen, ostensibly in search of the knife, but in reality to hide her emotion.

From that day my stepfather greeted his daughter as if she had never left home, but we made no effort to induce him to receive her husband. We felt that time alone would make this possible.

The story I had told my stepsister of hiding her father in the well must have been repeated by her to Horton and spread by him among the settlers, for it was not long after this that my little exploit had become the theme of conversation in every sod house in the township. Indeed, it seemed for a time as if every one in the county sought me out to congratulate me. Each had a different version of the story. Instead of being angry, the outwitted settlers who had come to mob my stepfather took it as a splendid joke on themselves. In fact, it even served to turn a little of their animosity away from Alexander Frayden.

"Don! I'm proud of you!" exclaimed Jameson, slapping me on the back one Sunday, as we emerged from his house after the morning service conducted therein by the Reverend Miles. "It shows you have brains, young man; and courage too!"

"I tank he ban a leetle heero!" spoke up Ole Olsen, who had overheard Jameson's remark. "It ban a good ting fer der ol' man, yas? An' fer Ole Olsen too, I tank, dat he ban in der well when we ban thar."

"Yes, we were pretty hot-headed that day, Don," Jameson said. "If you had not hidden your stepfather, mischief might have been done and I have been very thankful, many times since, that we did not find him."

The daily routine of the farm once more was taken up; but, with William and Jennie married, and without James and sister Irene, Frayden's Folly had become a very lonely place for me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

OUTWITTING THE SCHOOL TRUSTEES

The blizzard that had come early in the month of November had been a false alarm. A Chinook wind soon wiped the prairies clean of snow. The ground was not yet frozen and, in place of the frosty tang of the previous month, the air was now as balmy as in early spring. A new warmth radiated from the receding sun and once more the farmers were to be seen plowing the fall stubble.

Since James had taken his departure, my stepfather had found it necessary to lend himself to manual toil — the first time since our advent into the Territory. It was beyond my strength to keep up with all the work there was to be done about the farm.

With the help of the neighbors, the threshing had been done. What few crops there were to dispose of long since had been hauled to market by my stepfather. The hay crop, which had been light, was now gathered and stacked near the barn door. My stepfather volunteered to ride the sulky plow while, behind the oxen, I trudged through the yellow stubble with the walking plow. Between us, we managed to do the fall plowing, and soon the ground lay ready for spring planting. There was little left to do but husk the corn that had been hauled in and piled under the straw-covered shed. This could be done, a little at a time, during the long winter months, which were rapidly approaching.

Afraid that winter would come and go without my having any opportunity of attending school, I thought long and deeply over the problem of my education. It was evident that my stepfather and his two friends who constituted the school board would do nothing toward building a schoolhouse unless forced to do so. These three still had sufficient influence in the township, regardless of my stepfather's unpopularity with many of the settlers, to defeat the will of the majority.

About this time, a seemingly chimerical plan presented itself to my mind. I was determined to go to school and to help make it possible for others to do so. I had saved the money earned some time before for this very purpose, and through my brother-in-law, John Horton, I bought a new suit and an overcoat, paid for out of the earnings I received from the Reverend Miles. The more I thought it over, the more reasonable seemed my plan. I knew I had one friend who would abet me and in him I determined to confide.

With this idea in mind, I made an excuse, one Sunday afternoon, for taking a ride on my Indian pony. Doubtless my stepfather assumed I was on my way to see Violet Rounds; but after disappearing over a slight ridge in the prairies, I circled around to the west to Henry Bacon's. Needless to say, I received a warm welcome, and we sat down to review the school situation.

"The school trustees will not build this year," I said. "I heard my stepfather talking with Parson Jones and Rounds. They fear that a schoolhouse would give the Reverend Miles a meeting-place for his congregation, and that's exactly what they want to prevent."

"It can't be so bad as that, Don," was the quiet reply. "But what are your plans?"

"I've been thinking that, if we could get one of the settlers living near the center of the township to donate the use of the ground, the boys could build a sod schoolhouse, and a barn for our horses, but —" I hesitated, "where could we get the money for a teacher?"

"That is a capital idea!" he answered. "I have another one. Your stepfather and his friends might not like it, however. Perhaps he wouldn't let you go to school, anyway."

"I'd like to see him stop me!" I exclaimed in indignation, and yet inwardly trembling at the thought of such a contingency. "But what's your scheme?"

"We will act on the very suggestion your stepfather has given us."

"What suggestion?" I asked, much puzzled.

"Don't you see? If we can offer a plan that will provide a meeting-place for those who wish to form a union church, they will turn in and help us build it."

"Wouldn't that be fine!" I exclaimed. "But how about a teacher? The Farmer City gang controls the county. It appointed the county superintendent of schools and he hasn't organized things yet."

"True; but your stepfather didn't deliver the necessary signatures to the petition asking the Governor to appoint the Farmer City candidates for county commissioners, and now those people won't have much interest in anything Alexander Frayden wants. They might be willing to help us just to spite him; but, if they won't help us, I'll teach the school myself and it won't cost any one a dollar," magnanimously offered my friend. "I used to teach school in Canada, and I shall not be too busy this winter to manage it all right. It will be a long ride for me, of course. Six miles going and six returning home each day isn't any fun through such weather as we have. I'd be glad to do it, though, just to show your stepfather and his friends that they can't stop us from having a school, even if the trustees do refuse to provide one."

Delighted with this turn of events, and with renewed courage, I thanked my friend and started home, determined just as soon as possible to interview every boy in the township.

I had already ridden half a mile, when I thought of getting the advice of the Reverend Miles. It may be that the possibility of meeting his young sister-in-law had something to do with my determination to act upon the thought; if so, my hope was realized, for I soon overtook the young lady in question skirting the road in search of Indian arrows.

The plains still were marked with evidences of the Indians' occupation. Flint arrowheads easily were found upon the prairies. Occasionally we would come upon an Indian hammer head, a granite-like rock that had been ground down into the form of a large goose egg. Around the center, the Indians had made a groove into which they wrapped a buckskin thong, the ends of which were tied around a flexible handle.

"Well! If it isn't Don of the Windmills!" exclaimed Maud as I overtook her.

"Why the sarcasm?" I questioned, not quite certain whether she was making fun of me or not.

"Sarcasm?" she interrogated, in honest surprise. "Why, I wouldn't be guilty of that, and you know it, Don! I have great respect for old Don Quixote. Many of the things we have to fight may seem no more important than windmills, but seeming does not make them so. The one who can brave public opinion and ridicule in a fight for principle deserves great respect. With you, Don, it has been real heroism. Do you think we don't appreciate your chivalry in shielding that man from the wrath of the neighbors, when he has been nothing but a tyrant to you? Do you think every one in the township doesn't know how he abuses his family?"

"Haven't thought of it," I answered. In order to avoid the subject, I tried to tell her of our plans for building a schoolhouse.

"Another windmill, Don, and a mighty fine one at that!" she exclaimed. "I'll get brother-in-law to help you. Come on to the house!" she commanded, as she laid hold of the horse's bridle.

I jumped from my broncho, and we started to walk to the house; but we had not gone far before Zeke Rounds, on horseback, overtook us. He greeted Maud effusively, giving me a bare word of recognition.

"Confound it!" I said to myself, at this unwelcome interruption.

"Just going over to your brother-in-law's to see if he wants any one to help husk corn," Zeke said, as he tried to lead his horse between us.

"Walk on the other side, Zeke," Maud protested. "There now, I can talk to both of you. O Zeke, what do you suppose? Don has the grandest scheme for a schoolhouse you ever could imagine," she rattled on, utterly oblivious of my attempt to warn her to say nothing to Zeke about my plan. My signal, however, came too late. The mischief had been accomplished.

"What's Donald Deen got to do with buildin' of a schoolhouse?" Zeke gruffly questioned. "Better leave such things to his elders."

"Leaving it to your elders and my elders doesn't seem to be getting us very far," I replied sarcastically. "You know as well as I do that my stepfather already has decided for your father and for Parson Jones and all the rest of the settlers that we do not need a schoolhouse this year; but some of us think differently, Zeke Rounds!" I ended with much heat.

"And what is your wonderful plan, Mister Deen?" sneered Zeke.

"Shame on you, Zeke!" Maud interrupted. "Don suggests that all of the boys get together and build a sod schoolhouse; yes, and a barn for their horses. Isn't that great?"

"Huh! Any one could of thought of that," Zeke replied.

"Certainly they could, but they didn't think of it and Don did!" replied Maud, somewhat exasperated.

"Where you going to get the money for a teacher?" Zeke asked in disdain.

"If the township won't pay later on, Henry Bacon has promised to teach without pay," I replied.

"Oh, he has, has he?" Zeke rejoined. "And who is goin' to furnish the lumber for the roof and the floor, and the window casings and doors? Besides, there'll be benches and coal to buy," he added.

Not having thought of all of these items, I was nonplussed for the moment, but Maud at once suggested a way out of such difficulties.

"We'll get the neighbors to contribute the lumber and hardware and, if necessary, some of them may give money," she suggested.

"Well, you better keep it quiet, if you want to carry out your fool idea, is all I've got to say," Zeke spitefully said. "If your stepfather gets wind of it, he'll nip it in the bud all right."

"Yes, and you'll probably be the first one to carry the news to him through your father," I retorted.

"Say, Maud, will you go with me to the dinner?" Zeke asked, ignoring my presence and paying no heed to my insinuation.

To say that I was chagrined at this invitation, openly flouted in my face, would not do justice to my feelings of outraged pride. I long had been trying to muster sufficient courage to invite Maud to go with me to this coming neighborhood festivity; but, so far, I had been unable to do so, and now I blamed myself bitterly for my timidity.

The dinner was to be given by the Gopher Club, which the boys of the township had organized during the previous spring. I had planned to invite Maud; but my slowness and self-consciousness had made me an easy victim to Zeke Rounds' self-assurance.

As Zeke put the question to Maud, I noticed a slight inclination of her head in my direction, as if she would question me from the corners of her eyes, but my chagrin at being forestalled by Zeke deprived me of all moral courage. If I had had any intention of trying to frustrate Zeke's purpose, his next remark would have squelched it. "You're goin' with sister Violet, ain't you, Don? Seems to me I heard her say somethin' of the sort."

I knew he was lying, as not one word regarding the matter had passed between Violet Rounds and me, but, for the moment, I could not reply.

"Oh, are you, Don?" Maud questioned, looking me directly in the eyes, whereat I blushed as if I had been caught in some underhand proceeding. Before I could deny the charge, she turned to Zeke and said, "Certainly, I'll go with you, Zeke. Here we are, home, and there is my brother-in-law at the barn. I'll leave you boys. Goodby, Donald. Thank you for the invitation, Zeke."

With a saucy twist of her head, she turned and swept into the house, leaving Zeke grinning with pleasure, and me humiliated and abashed.

Without a word to Zeke, I jumped upon my pony and, digging my heels into its flanks, soon was speeding across the prairie on my way home.

Why was I so stupid, I wondered. Why couldn't the girl know that I would have forfeited everything I possessed to win her consent to take her to the dinner? All thought of my plans for building a schoolhouse had vanished. I could think only of the chagrin I felt at having permitted Zeke Rounds to interfere with my plans regarding Maud Warren.

Within the week, however, I realized that if a school was to be started during the coming winter, we must begin at once. With this thought in mind, I started out again one crisp morning, determined to see as many of the boys in the township as possible. My first visit was to be at the home of Dan Smith, who lived a mile east of the Rounds family. I could not go by the Rounds homestead without being seen; but I made up my mind that, if any of the family hailed me, I would give some reason for my journey other than the true one.

I was not mistaken in my expectation of being seen. It was Samuel Rounds himself who called to me as I was passing.

"What, goin' by, without stoppin'? Come on in, boy, and see the folks!"

There was nothing for me to do but accept the invitation, but I made my call as brief as was consistent with politeness.

"Let me ride with you, Don," Violet suggested, as I prepared to leave.

"Shame on you, Violet Rounds! Why don't you wait until you're asked?" her mother said reprovingly.

"Oh, that's all right, mother. Don's a good pal! We don't have to wait for each other's invitations, do we, Don?"

In a few minutes, we were galloping down the road. Not a word was said by either of us, until, somewhat tired, we drew rein and brought the ponies to a walk.

"What are you up to now, Don? Getting ready to build your schoolhouse?"

"Who told you about it? Zeke, I suppose! Regular tattle-tale!"

"Yes, he did, Don, and what's more, he told father. You know what that means. If you're not careful, they'll block your scheme. They are much excited about the idea and are only waiting for Parson Jones to come back from Huron before they start something. Seems as though you could tell every one else in the township but me," she ended, somewhat hurt.

"When will he be back, Vi?" I asked, ignoring her complaint.

"Not for another week, I understand."

"That will give us time enough," I said.

"It's a wonder your stepfather didn't suspect you were up to something this morning. How did it happen he let you go?" she questioned.

"He didn't. He has gone to Blunt," I replied.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," Violet said. "I'll see as many as I can and you do the same. We will ask each one to take it upon himself to see some one else. We can cover the township in this way in a day or two. We'd better arrange to have a meeting of all who are interested. Where can we meet?"

"At Henry Bacon's," I suggested. "I know he won't object. Suppose we make it for Saturday night?"

And so, with Violet's help, every boy in the township was interviewed, and, with a few exceptions, the interest of the parents also was enlisted. Indeed, many of them promised to attend the meeting on Saturday night.

Before I had left Violet, we had arranged that she would ride over to Frayden's Folly and that I should accompany her the rest of the way to Henry Bacon's house. As she joined me on the following Saturday night, she told of her success in enlisting the aid of the neighbors in our project.

"Father, of course, didn't know what I was doing. By the way, your stepfather has been busy already with those he thinks he can control. I understand some of the settlers have refused to have anything to do with it. I guessed who they would be and as I was afraid they'd tell father I was interested, I got some of the boys to see them," she said.

As we neared our destination, I suddenly remembered that I must make some decision in regard to the Gopher Club dinner, or go unaccompanied. It was fully understood that each boy should invite one of the girls of the neighborhood to the dinner; and there were hardly girls enough to go around. I often used to wonder why there were so many more boys and men than there were girls and women in the Territory.

"You're going with me to the Gopher dinner, Vi, aren't you?" I asked.

"Why, aren't you going with Maud?" she countered.

"No, I didn't ask her; I asked you," I replied somewhat crisply, half suspecting that Zeke had told her all about the affair.

"Thank you, I shall be glad to go," she replied.

"Did Zeke tell you about asking Maud?" I ventured.

"Yes, and I think it was horrid of him to act as he did. You must not feel it is necessary to ask me to go with you, Don, just because Zeke said what he did; but then, I know you understand, anyway, so it is all right," she said, trying to put me at my ease. "Maud is a sweet girl and every one likes her, but, if I guess rightly, she is easily influenced." She looked at me rather quizzically, but said nothing more.

In a few minutes, we drew rein before the schoolmaster's house. We found a goodly gathering of settlers already there. They seemed as much interested in the schoolhouse project as were the boys and girls of the township. Soon we were engaged in planning how to outwit the school trustees.

It was arranged that the boys would do the work of erecting the schoolhouse and the barn, with the exception of such carpenter work as would be necessary. It was not a difficult matter to find a representative of almost any trade among the settlers. Some of the farmers promised to furnish the necessary lumber, while others pledged the hardware that would be required. Work was to begin the next Monday morning. The girls volunteered to be on hand with plenty of good things to eat.

The day before this meeting, my stepfather had returned from Blunt. Evidently he had met with some of his followers, who had given him an inkling of what was going on; but just what our plan was I felt satisfied he had not yet discovered. On Sunday afternoon he attended services at the home of Samuel Rounds, and there he learned enough to arouse his anger.

"It's an outrage!" he yelled, when he returned home. "Here we, the duly elected school trustees, are ignored and an attempt is made to thwart our plans! It is just a scheme of that would-be preacher to secure a meeting-house at the expense of the township! I'd like to know who started it!" he stormed, pacing up and down the room.

"It's not a scheme of any preacher!" I retorted.

"Be still, you little fool! What do you know about it?" he cried, turning menacingly toward me.

"I ought to know something about it," I answered, throwing aside all caution.

"Donald, be quiet!" mother commanded.

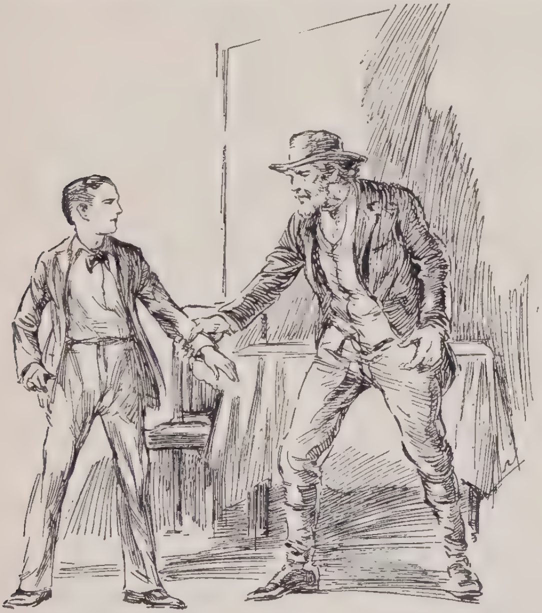
"Come away, Don," urged Aunt Mary.

To avoid a scene for my mother's sake, and to placate Aunt Mary, I turned and would have left the room, had not my stepfather grasped me by the arm and swung me about with a force that nearly threw me off my feet.

Before I could recover my equilibrium, Aunt Mary sprang between us like an enraged lioness. Her little, slender body quivered with excitement, as, with right arm upraised, she brandished a poker before the face of my astounded stepfather.

"Don't you dare lay a finger on that boy!" she warned, her voice quavering from fright and excitement.

For some reason I never understood, my stepfather



"My stepfather grasped me by the arm and swung me about."

always had avoided an open issue with Aunt Mary. She possessed a spiritual force that cowed the man. He could have swept her aside with one hand, as one would sweep a fly from the table; but, without a word to her, he lowered the pitch of his voice as he turned to me and said, "Well, you little rascal, just what is it that you know about this fool scheme?"

"It's not a fool scheme!" I replied. "And I started it myself!"

"You? You?" He laughed, as if he thought me too insignificant to be capable of any independent action. "And how, may I ask, did you start it?"

In a few words, I told him of the plan I had thought out and how some of the neighbors had approved it, and of the ready response it had met at the meeting of the previous night.

His face turned white with wrath as he listened in silence to my recital. As I finished, he brandished his fist in my face and shouted, "You may have started it, but you are not going to finish it! Understand me! You are not to take any part in helping. And when the school is built, you need not expect to attend it, if indeed they succeed in getting a school started." With that, he left the room, my aunt following him to the door, the poker still in her hand.

"O Donald, why did you say anything about it?" my mother lamented, as soon as he was out of hearing.

"I just couldn't help it, mother. It made me mad to have him insinuate that the Reverend Miles was at the bottom of it, as if he were trying to get the better of another minister," I replied.

The next day, my stepfather, fearing I might attempt to join the boys in their task, saw to it that I did not have a moment's time from my chores. One task after another he gave me, but when I finished all of them, he was at a loss to find something more for me to do.

"You go out into the field and husk corn," he finally said.

The best of the corn had been hauled from the shock to the shed near the barn where we could husk it during odd hours. What was left in the field was a patch of flint corn hardly higher than my waist. Most of the stalks had yielded nothing but nubbins. To husk these was a backbreaking task. As each ear was pulled from the stalk, it was husked and thrown into a bushel basket, which had to be lifted over the rough sod from one place to another, until it was filled. The corn was then dumped into sacks and the sacks tied, ready for the wagon to come along and gather them up.

Without a word to my stepfather, I picked up a bushel basket and an armful of sacks and walked off. He watched me enter the corn field, which lay about half a mile east of the house. For about an hour, I worked down one of the rows of corn, all the while getting farther from the house. Doubtless, by this time, my stepfather felt satisfied that I had been sufficiently cowed for the rest of the day, for I could not see him about the place. Probably he had returned to the house to read his much-beloved Utopian farm papers.

I hardly had left the house before an idea suggested itself which instantly I decided to put into execution. The time had come, which Horton had intimated generally came to every one, when self-respect must be maintained at all hazards, and I knew that I must now take a stand against my stepfather. Certainly, I was entitled to an education, if not a little recreation. Almost the entire work of the farm was now falling upon me; I labored early and late, uncomplainingly. His demands were becoming more and more exacting. It had been my desire, for the sake of all concerned, to avoid friction with him. I accepted his abuse quietly, with as little show of resentment as possible; his instructions I tried to follow to the letter. But I had made up my mind that I would either go to school during the coming winter or leave home. Taking all the circumstances into consideration, I felt justified in trying to outwit him, although I had had a battle with conscience before I arrived at this conclusion.

Satisfied that I no longer could be seen from Frayden's Folly, I walked to the end of the corn field, and was soon on my way to help in building the new sod schoolhouse. As I approached the site, which had been cheerfully donated by one of the settlers, I could see that the four walls of the sod structure already stood several feet above the level of the prairies. A number of the boys, driving oxen, were breaking sod. Others had removed the box from a wagon and in its place had laid planks upon which they were hauling the sod for the building. Other boys were laying the sod walls of the schoolhouse and also of the barn, while some of the men were sawing lumber for the roof and floor.

I arrived just when lunch was announced. A tablecloth was spread upon the prairie and upon it were heaped the many good things the girls had prepared. There was no lack of appetite and good cheer to make the meal a feast.

"How did you get away, Don?" Violet asked.

"He sent me out into the field to husk corn, but I slipped away as soon as I could," I answered.

"Zeke told father as much as he knew about our plans and father repeated it to Parson Jones and your stepfather. Mr. Frayden said, 'As parents, we can keep our children away from any school they start.'"

"What did they say then?"

"Oh, they kind of dropped the subject. They don't know just what to do."

"Why can't we have the Gopher dinner in the new schoolhouse?" I suggested. "We can get it finished in a few days."

"Splendid! Say, folks, listen!" she called, as she turned toward the company seated on the grass. "Don suggests that we have the Gopher dinner in the new schoolhouse."

The suggestion met with instant approval from all but Zeke Rounds.

"Don's alwuz havin' fine ideas," he sneered. "The schoolhouse won't be ready by the first of December."

"Yes, it will," chorused several.

With this added incentive, all hands redoubled their efforts. Within the week, the schoolhouse was complete. About eighteen by twenty-two feet in dimension, the new structure was large enough to seat all the children in the neighborhood. Long wooden benches had been constructed; a board across the back of each bench was slanted so that it would serve as a desk for those seated behind it. Crude though it was, the place was bound to be comfortable.

When I went home, on the day I had slipped away to join the boys who were building the schoolhouse, I found that my stepfather had not discovered my absence from the corn field. My conscience troubling me a little, I told my mother of the incident and how anxious I was to aid in the work, and she at once gave me her permission to do so. However, I continued to evade my stepfather's watchfulness, for fear of bringing trouble upon mother.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ZEKE ROUNDS' ACCIDENT

THE dinner to be held in the new schoolhouse was the culmination of the Gopher Club's activities for the season.

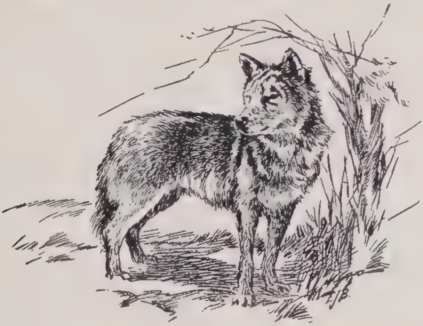
The prairie gopher is a brownish-colored rodent with a yellow-striped body and a rat-like tail covered with short fur. It somewhat resembles a squirrel, although it is not so large and its tail is not bushy. The gopher lives in holes, which it burrows in the ground. The pocket gophers, as they have been called, have two pockets, one on each cheek. These little pockets open on the outside of the cheek, and in these receptacles the gopher stores a supply of seeds and grain, after first gorging himself upon all he can eat. When he wishes to unload this supply, he squeezes the grain from the pockets out upon the ground with his forefeet. Gophers had become so numerous that the farmers found them a pest. If grain was not readily available, they would dig up the seed corn the settlers had planted. All attempts to exterminate them had been futile. The menace at last became so serious that the county authorities offered a bounty of a penny for each gopher tail turned in to the county treasurer's office.

By holding the dead body of a gopher by the tail and giving it a quick jerk, the furry outer covering of the animal's tail could be separated from the bony portion. Needless to say, this bounty set every boy in the settlement to hunting gophers.

In order to stimulate interest in the campaign, the boys of the township organized a Gopher Club, which divided into two groups, one group representing the east side of the township and the other the western border. The side that secured the most gopher tails by the end of the season was to be declared the winner, and the losers were to give a dinner in honor of the winners.

The wolves likewise having given the farmers much trouble, preying upon sheep and even upon young calves, the county had offered a bounty of one dollar for each wolf scalp. In the timber along the Missouri, and in such places as Swan Lake, the wolves were quite bold. Running in packs, they did not hesitate to attack even the larger farm animals.

Although it seldom attacked anything larger than a sheep, the coyote, which has been called the hyena of the plains, made serious inroads upon the lambs and upon the chickens and other fowls. Its melancholy howl often made hideous the lonely prairie night. It was not an infrequent sight during the winter nights to see a lone coyote seated on its haunches in the midst of what seemed an arctic waste. Not a house in sight; not a living thing visible but this jackal of the prairies, with head up-raised toward the moon, howling as no other animal can howl, with an indescribable wail. For each



A wolf.

coyote scalp turned in, the county paid a bounty of seventy-five cents.

After being organized, the Gopher Club decided to add to its hunt the wolf and the coyote. Later, although the county paid no bounty for them, the fox, the badger, the wildcat, the rattlesnake, and the hawk were added to the chase, as they were all considered inimical to the farmer. The skunk would have been included, had any one cared to risk bringing in evidence of his success in killing this animal.

Taking as a basis the bounties that the county paid, it was considered fair to count a wolf scalp as equal to one hundred gopher tails and a coyote scalp as equal to seventy-five. A rattlesnake's rattles were counted equal to one wolf scalp. The wildcat was held at five hundred gopher tails; the fox, at fifty; the badger, at twenty-five; and the hawk, at twenty-five.

Zeke Rounds had been selected as leader for the east side of the township, while I had been chosen captain of the west side. It was to make no difference where we hunted or secured our game, or what means we took to procure it.

The hunt had ceased on the tenth of November; the count was to be made before the first of December; and as soon thereafter as possible the dinner was to be given for the winning side. The bounties paid by the county were to go to the individuals earning them. Needless to say, rivalry between the two sides had been keen, becoming more and more intense as the closing days of the season drew near. So far, the record of each side had been kept secret; but many a guess had been made, especially when the news of an unusual capture leaked out.

The night of the dinner finally arrived and all plans for the program were complete. Most of the company already had gathered, when Violet and I reached the new schoolhouse, now ablaze with light. Two large brass kerosene lamps hung suspended from the ceiling, giving the room a most cheerful appearance. The crude benches and the kitchen table that served as a desk for the teacher seemed, at the time, quite adequate.

The teacher, Henry Bacon, acted as the master of ceremonies. Seated behind the kitchen table, he called the meeting to order and then briefly stated the reason for the organization of the Gopher Club and recited the rules formulated to govern the contest.

"I will appoint Ed Zuber to act as counter for the west side, and Will Manful as counter for the east side of the township," announced the teacher. "They will take their places on the platform, if they please. Will the captains of each side join them — Donald Deen for the west side, and Ezekiel Rounds for the east side?"

I walked up to the platform, but, strange to say, Zeke Rounds was not in the room. Just then the door opened and in came Maud, out of breath and laughing as if unable to control herself.

"Where's Zeke?" several called to her, but she seemed powerless to reply.

"For pity's sake, Maud, what's the joke?" Violet asked, taking her by the shoulders and playfully shaking her.

"Zeke!" she managed to reply.

"Well, what's the matter with Zeke?"

At this, she threw her head back and laughed still harder.

"Tell us what it is," Violet demanded, while the rest of us crowded about her.

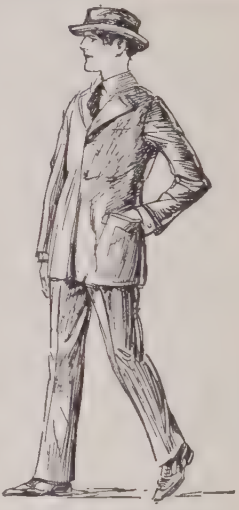
"A-a sk-skunk!" she almost shrieked.

At that moment the door quietly opened, and one of the girls, descrying the figure in the doorway, cried out, "Zeke!"

Zeke it was, and in Sunday attire, with celluloid collar and a glaring red necktie and a pair of celluloid cuffs bedecked with brazen gilt cuff buttons. The cuffs persisted in dropping out of his coat sleeves, only to be shot back again by a peculiar twist of his arms. As he closed the door behind him and stood hesitant, the warmth of the room revealed the truth of Maud Warren's story.

"Get out! Get out! Quick!" shouted the crowd.

Thoroughly abashed, Zeke backed out of the door. Making my way through the crowd, I followed him, several of the other boys accompanying me, but all of us keeping our distance.



"Zeke it was, and in Sunday attire."

"Zeke!" I called. "There's a box at the south end of the schoolhouse; pull it up at the middle window. I'll open the window and you can stand on the box and see and hear everything. The wind is blowing from the northwest and we'll be all right inside."

Acting upon the suggestion, he found and adjusted the box, while I entered the schoolroom and raised the window.

Maud having quieted down, the school-teacher once more called order. "We hope to hear from several this evening who will tell of their exploits, and I am going to ask Miss Warren to tell us of her escort's recent experience. The count, however, will first be taken," concluded the schoolmaster.

At this announcement, Maud found little cause for laughter. And then the count began. First, the gopher tails were checked up. Each boy handed in his package, marked with his name and the word "East" or "West," according to the side to which he belonged. As the tally was recorded, the counters called out the numbers, which were chalked upon a crude blackboard suspended on the sod wall, behind the teacher's desk.

"Hugh Jameson, west side, 167." "Hans Nelson, east side, 150." "Ernest Dreblow, west side, 210." So the count went on, the girls dancing up and down and clapping, as one side or the other gained, according to their sympathies. So far, the count held in favor of Zeke Rounds, with a total of one thousand, two hundred and forty-six gopher tails. Zeke's red face beamed with delight as he leaned upon the window sill and looked in upon us.

"How many 'pole cats' did you run into, Zeke?" called one of the boys.

"Too bad, Don, I'm afraid he has you beaten," Violet whispered to me, sympathetically, as I stepped down from the platform for a moment or two.

"Wait!" I replied, with a hard glitter in my eyes, as I noticed Maud Warren congratulating Zeke.

"Never mind her, Don," Violet said, noticing my discomfiture, "that doesn't mean anything. Maud is so good-hearted, she couldn't refrain from congratulating the winner; but if she thought you were feeling disappointed, she would be over here in a jiffy, trying to sympathize with you."

Her words were true indeed, for hardly had she ceased speaking before Maud, realizing that Zeke's success naturally would prove my disappointment, hurried over to my side.

"Don't mind, Don," she said; "you're not yet beaten. They haven't counted anything but the gopher tails."

"Naturally, you would be sorry for the loser, wouldn't you?" I asked, taking my cue from Violet's words.

"Why, of course, Don. I hate to see any one disappointed."

"But some one must lose. Whom would you prefer to see win?"

"Why — I wish you both could win!" she exclaimed in girlish confusion. "But then, you know, I live on the west side," she added, her face brightening as she saw a way out of the dilemma.

The west side had a surprise in store for the east-siders. We allowed their count to mount and mount and then, when we felt they had reached their approximate limit, we turned in our heaviest counts.

"John Zanders, west side, ten wolf scalps, 1000 tallies. Hans Larson, west side, five coyote and five wolf scalps, 875 tallies. Bert Austin, west side, one wildcat, ten wolves, 600 tallies. Donald Deen, two coyotes, one rattlesnake and a badger, tally 1775." This, of course, was in addition to our tally of gopher tails.

The total tally for the east-siders was 3456; while the total for the west side was 4210. The western border of the county was broken country, bordered by the Missouri River. Its buttes and hills were penetrated by creeks and sloughs so that, naturally, the west-siders had a better opportunity so far as wolves or wildcats were concerned. The gray wolves came up from the timber on the Missouri, following the sloughs and lake beds, but it was only when driven by hunger that they ventured far out on the open prairie. The coyotes, however, frequented the plains.

Needless to say, Zeke Rounds was a poor loser. He seemed to sink below the window casing as the result of the count was made known.

"Perhaps if you had brought in that skunk, Zeke, we might have counted you in as the winner," young Jameson called out.

"S'pose if the west-siders had lost, Donald Deen would have made us count in that buffalo the half-breed shot!" he enviously replied.

"Shame on you, Zeke Rounds," Violet interposed. "Besides, it was Don and Manfred who shot the buffalo, and not the half-breed, and you know it!"

Somehow, Zeke seemed to disappear; at least, I did not see him again that evening, so engaged was I with what was going on.

"Congratulations, Don," Violet said, turning upon me unawares.

"Thank you, Vi," I replied.

The schoolmaster then called upon Maud to tell of her experience with Zeke. After considerable urging, she was induced to come to the platform. Abashed, sorry for Zeke, and yet still bubbling over with merriment as she thought of his escapade, it was with much difficulty that she told the story.

As they had neared the schoolhouse, an animal of some kind had run across their path. The night was dark and cloudy, the moon only occasionally flashing a momentary gleam through a rift in the clouds. Zeke thought the animal was a badger. Stopping the horse, he jumped out of the buggy, gun in hand, ready to add another score to his count. As Manfred had told James and me, the skunk is inclined to be "sort of a friendly animal," and unless one attempts to capture or threaten it, it will not volunteer an attack. In this case, the skunk had crossed the road and was crouched in the grass.

Trying to catch a glimpse of what he supposed was a badger, Zeke stumbled upon it with disastrous results. Driving on ahead to the schoolhouse, as Zeke had suggested, Maud had left her escort to make his way on foot. Fortunately, they were less than a mile from the school.

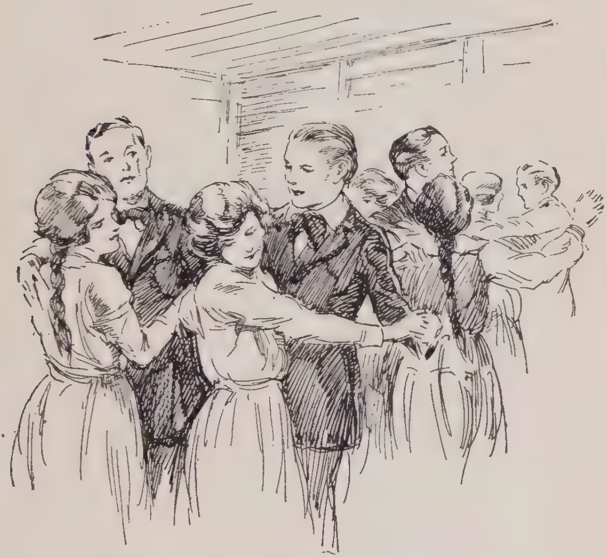
A number of the boys told of their exploits in bagging wolves and coyotes, and then the dinner was served. It was a success, even for the defeated side.

After dinner, the benches were hustled out of doors, and to our surprise some one produced a fiddle. Soon most of us were dancing the Virginia Reel and the "Drunken Sailor," too happy and carefree to think of the reproof we should receive the next day when it would be learned that the new schoolhouse had been "opened" with a dance, — a performance ranking in the eyes of many of the settlers with the worst snares of the devil.

By midnight, the oil in the kerosene lamps had about burned out. The lights were growing dimmer and dimmer, so all hastened to get their wraps. But Zeke had not yet returned. Remembering what I had previously suffered as a result of my slow wit, I hastened to suggest to Maud and Violet that I take them both as far as Violet's home and then ride on with Maud. To this both girls agreed, although I somehow sensed that Violet would have been better pleased had I suggested that we both accompany Maud home.

My surmise that Zeke had gone home to change his clothes had been correct. Doubtless he had not been able to array himself in substitute apparel in time to return to the schoolhouse before the gathering had broken up. And so, bidding Violet good night, I turned the horse westward and drove Maud Warren home, elated with my good fortune and yet a little conscience-smitten as I realized that I was profiting from Zeke's misfortune.

There was much that I had wanted to say to Maud Warren. Many a time I had rehearsed the exact words I wished to say; but only the most trivial remarks fell from my lips. Zeke, I knew, should have been in my place. Somehow, now that I had obtained my desire, it seemed that it had been gained at the expense of both Zeke and Violet. I was irritated by this thought. For mile after mile, Maud and I exchanged commonplaces, my mind filled with lofty thoughts and my heart stirred with the realization of the girl's immediate presence. I wondered if I might hold her hand, and yet I could not



"Soon most of us were dancing."

compel myself to try the experiment. No soul-driving power lent strength to my wish to do so, and my mind would not release the thought that Violet would have been better pleased had she accompanied us. And so, having said good night, I drove home very much perplexed, disgusted with myself and thoroughly disgruntled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LOST IN A BLIZZARD

The beginning of school was set for the tenth of December. Most of the important work about the farm had been done, so that, until preparations for spring became necessary, there would be little to do beyond husking corn, hauling hay, and caring for the stock.

The boys of the township had contributed enough hay for the school barn to last through the term. Some of the children would be compelled to drive four or five miles to school. A drive of that distance, across the Dakota plains, twice a day, during the winter months, was no pleasure trip.

Samuel Rounds, with my stepfather's assistance, had done all he could to persuade the settlers not to allow their children to attend school. As trustees, Frayden and Rounds now promised to erect a suitable building in the spring and to engage a teacher who would be a credit to the township.

Much was made of the innocent dancing that had been indulged in at the Gopher dinner, and blame for it was laid at the schoolmaster's door. He was held up to the settlers as an ungodly man; one without educational advantages, who was likely to instil all sorts of mistaken notions into the heads of his pupils. As a result, some of the settlers decided to keep their children at home; a few others, who owed my stepfather money, followed his advice. But the majority of the farmers welcomed the opportunity of placing their children in school. On the morning of the first day of school, twenty-five children were awaiting the arrival of their volunteer teacher.

As a last resort, I later learned, my stepfather tried to block the plan by influencing the newly appointed county superintendent of schools. The political organization of the county had just been effected. Taxes for school purposes would not be available before another year, so that it really was doubtful whether or not the county superintendent was in a position to extend much aid, had he been so inclined. My stepfather had caused him to look upon our project as a private enterprise and beyond his jurisdiction. This being the case, there was no prospect that the new school-teacher would be paid later, when money would become available for school purposes.

Henry Bacon, however, kept his word. All that winter he drove twelve miles a day and gave us of his best, only to return home to find the usual evening chores awaiting him. Not one penny did he ever receive for this unselfish public service.

In our parks and our plazas are erected, in bronze and marble, the figures of our statesmen, soldiers, inventors, and poets; but where on the country's broad highways, or where in the nation's halls, may be seen the sculptured figures of our pioneer country school-teachers?

It was not without fear that I had broached the subject of attending school to my stepfather. Before doing so, I had discussed the matter with my mother.

"You may go, Donald, if you wish. It does not make any difference what your — your stepfather may say. I shall see that, in this one thing, I have my own way."

With this encouragement, I approached my stepfather after his return from church services the Sunday before the opening of school.

"School opens tomorrow," I timidly ventured at the dinner table, addressing no one in particular and yet aiming the suggestion at my stepfather.

"School? School for scandal would be better!" he said. "It's a disgrace to the township for the settlers even to think of placing their children in the hands of so ungodly and so ignorant a man as that Canadian."

"He's not ungodly!" I indignantly protested. "He's a member of the church and as good a Christian as any one."

"Church? You call the mob that follows after that Miles fellow a church?"

Ignoring the question, I said, "Why do you call him ignorant? He graduated from college and he has taught school in Canada."

"He may say so, but how do we know it? He never has presented his credentials to any one, has he?"

"I've seen his diploma," I stubbornly answered, determined to defend my friend. "Anyway," I added, "I'd like to go to school."

"Would you indeed? Where do you suppose the money for your books is to come from? You know how little we have to eat. You can see for yourself how much we need about the place."

"The books won't cost much. Besides, I saved enough from working at well-digging to buy all my books," I answered proudly.

"Oh, you did, did you?" he sneered. "Well, how are you going to get your chores done and go to school too?"

"I can get up an hour earlier and be home by five in the afternoon," I answered.

Aunt Mary fidgeted in her chair. Mother said nothing. I could feel the tension, but this time I was determined to have my own way or to leave the farm.

"Well, you can't go, that's all there is to it!" my stepfather declared. "To think that I, the chairman of the school board, should be openly flouted by my own family!

If I let you go to school, I'd be the laughingstock of the township."

"But I am going, just the same," I said, defiantly.

"You are, are you!" he shouted, rising from the table as he spoke and leaning across it, shaking his fist at me.

"Alexander, be quiet and sit down!" commanded my mother. "If Donald wants to go to school, he shall!"

Turning to her in his wrath, he raised his hand as if to strike her; but, as he gained control of himself, his arm dropped and he fell back into his chair.

"You have had your own way in nearly everything, Alexander. I have tried not to oppose you, but you are going too far this time. Donald shall go to school if he wishes, and that is all that need be said."

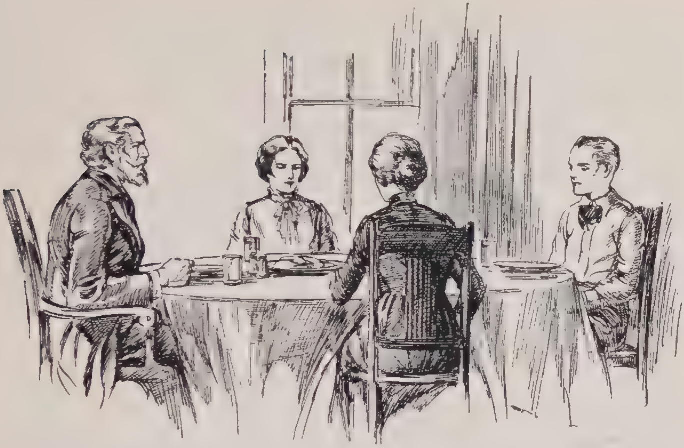
"Either I will go to school or I will leave the place!" I exclaimed.

"That's right! Both of you side against me!" he shouted. "If you go to school, you will walk there; and back, too!" he added.

"Shame on you, you brute!" suddenly burst out Aunt Mary. "Do you want to commit murder? Would you let that child walk three miles and a half twice a day, with the thermometer twenty or thirty below zero and maybe a blizzard raging? And to think he must get up before daylight and work long after dark, feeding three or four horses and a yoke of cattle that stand idle in the barn all day while he trudges through the cold and the drifts! Shame on you!"

"Why can't I ride one of the horses? The boys have built a barn and have hauled the hay to feed the horses," I interposed, in the hope of diverting my stepfather's wrath from Aunt Mary.

"Did you haul any hay?" he asked.



"'If you go to school, you will walk there; and back, too!' he added."

"No," I faltered, "but I could if you would let me."

"You know as well as I do that we haven't hay enough to go through the winter. There was no grass to speak of this year and the chances are that we'll have to feed the stock straw before the winter's over."

"But it won't take more hay to feed the horse in one place than it will in another," I answered.

"Yes, it would; at any rate, you couldn't very well haul just enough hay for your own horse, and no more. Do you want to appear small? We can't spare the hay, and if we could, I wouldn't let you take it, so there's no more to be said about it."

"Then I'll pay for what hay I use. The boys will sell me a load. I've enough money for that," I rejoined with a show of pride.

"If you go, you will walk; and it will be against my wishes and in defiance of my command, if you attempt to attend that school," he shouted, pushing his chair away from the table and stalking out of the room.

And so, with three horses, the Indian ponies, and a yoke of oxen standing idle in the barn, school meant for me a walk of three and a half miles twice a day. Nothing daunted, however, I set out on Monday morning. I had seen to it that all my chores were done and that everything about the barn was in good shape before I left.

Mother and Aunt Mary were afraid my stepfather would make a scene, but if he knew I started for school that morning, he made a pretense of hiding his knowledge. Not once during the day did he ask for me, mother told me later.

Among the twenty or more pupils in attendance, Violet and Zeke Rounds and Maud Warren were the three that held the most interest for me. It is not my intention to tell at this time of the winter days spent in the improvised schoolhouse. They were days of exposure and of hard work and disappointments, intermixed with hope and pleasure.

In these later days Henry Bacon, the schoolmaster, would not be considered an expert in pedagogy. He knew little, if anything, of the inductive method. "Motivation" was a word still uncoined in the vocabulary of pedagogy. The child's right to express its individuality had not then been thought of, and self-expression on the part of the pupil was largely confined to the pranks that such boys as Zeke Rounds perpetrated. Despite his limitations, Henry Bacon was a wise schoolmaster, and what he lacked in method, he made up in a knowledge of human nature. He understood boys and girls and he possessed the faculty of bringing out the best that was in them.

Before the term ended, we had read and parsed and diagrammed every sentence in *The Lady of the Lake*, and performed a like operation upon the entire first book of *Paradise Lost*. Ray's *Arithmetic* we studied from cover to cover, while Reed and Kellogg's old grammar became our Bible in the study of the English language. There was no river of any importance in any country that we could not trace from its source to its mouth; no country or state we could not bound; and no capital we could not call off at a moment's notice.

Etymology was the schoolmaster's hobby; and through Latin and Greek and French and Anglo-Saxon roots, prefixes, and suffixes, we waded with an interest that would shame a modern student of the dead languages.

"This book, children," the teacher once said to us, laying his hand upon his worn textbook, "is like a great bunch of keys. Learn to use 'roots' as keys, they will unlock for you many storehouses of knowledge."

I, at least, found his words true, and despite my subsequent study of the grammar of these languages, I learned more Latin and Greek during that winter in the sod schoolhouse of the Blue Blanket Valley than I ever have learned since.

Henry Bacon did not resemble the "Hoosier Schoolmaster," and we had no proverbial bully to strike terror into any one's heart. Zeke Rounds often made himself a nuisance, but nothing more serious came of his Yankee smartness than an occasional ducking in a snowdrift.

Acquiring an education was a serious business. Both boys and girls realized that this might be their only chance to gain the knowledge they had ardently longed for; so, if insubordination ever was manifest, it was squelched without a moment's delay by the whole class.

To us, the heroes of history were real men and women who actually had lived, instead of mere names whose appearance upon the textbook pages meant nothing but facts to be memorized. Myths and legends and stories from the classics and from the Bible were more than literature. They represented beauty to be reflected in our own lives; moral laws to be obeyed by each of us; and maxims that were to be our guideposts throughout life. Arithmetic, grammar, spelling, geography, — all the textbook studies, — were subjects that were as much a part of our lives as the everyday tasks of the home and farm. Such was the intensity of the schoolmaster's teachings — a schoolmaster who knew nothing about making classroom work "function in the life of the child."

The long walk to school, often started before the sun dogs appeared above the brink of the horizon, grew longer and more arduous as the winter days lengthened. During January, each day, the thermometer seemed to drop lower than the previous one. Occasionally, I would be overtaken by a stone-boat carrying some of the neighboring children and would thus secure a lift part of the way; but this happened but seldom, for my way did not cross the path followed by any of the other boys. To trudge across the snow-covered plains, now gliding on the frozen crusty surface and now plunging through drifts almost to my waist, was a task to daunt the stoutest of hearts. Often, a twenty-mile gale blew across the wintry desert and woe to man or beast exposed to the elements at such a time, if the thermometer fell much below zero.

One January afternoon, it came my turn to clean up the classroom after school. Each boy had agreed to take his turn at janitor service, and on this day, all the others had left for home before I finished dusting the benches. Four o'clock struck before I had completed my work. It already was growing dusk. I had noticed during the previous half-hour that it had begun to snow, but I thought nothing of it as I bundled up and set out for home. But as I turned the corner of the schoolhouse, I was startled. A half-mile before me, coming from the northwest like a bank of fog, impenetrable clouds seemed to be bearing down upon me. As they advanced, a gale of wind preceded them, loosening the snow from the glazed surface of the prairies, raising and swirling it in miniature cyclones. To start out in the teeth of such a storm meant certain death, for the temperature already was twenty below zero. There was nothing for me to do but to hurry back to the schoolhouse, where I knew I should have to remain all night.

Fortunately, the structure was sod and there was a sufficient supply of coal on hand to carry me through the night. I lit the big, swinging kerosene lamps, for darkness had suddenly blotted out everything in sight. Stirring up the fire, I removed my wraps and sat down in the teacher's chair, considerably alarmed at the prospect of being compelled to stay in the schoolhouse all night. I knew mother and Aunt Mary would be frantic at my absence. They might think I had gone home with one of the neighbors, but it was not likely, for they knew I had my chores to attend to after school.

It was six by the school clock before I realized that I was hungry. The lunches I brought from home were always meager. The daily fare of the family contained nothing in the way of pastry, cake, or fruit. Eggs were unobtainable and pork was about the only meat the farm afforded, so that a few slices of dry bread, with scraps of salt pork between them, constituted my daily lunch. I was, in fact, ashamed to have the other boys see the contents of my lunch package. The long walk in the cold gave me a ravenous appetite; consequently, I seldom left as much as a crumb of such fare as I had. The other families of the neighborhood were little better off than ours, so I knew it was useless to look for "left-overs" from any of the pupils' lunches. I melted some snow on the stove and tried to content myself with a drink of water.

There was not much in the way of reading matter with which to beguile the time, as the school did not boast of such a thing as a library. Fortunately, there was a Bible on the teacher's desk.

With Holy Writ, I was most familiar. In order to encourage us to memorize verses from the Bible, mother used to tell us the story of the man who, being thrown into prison, had been able to comfort himself by repeating the many passages he had learned from the Scriptures. I thought of this story as I picked up the Bible from the teacher's desk, realizing that I, too, was a prisoner. The charm of Biblical style had always held me, while the wonderful stories seemed ever new; so it was with real pleasure that I now turned to the old familiar Book for company.

The wind fairly howled about the door and window casings; the snow in angry gusts blew against the panes. I opened the door, but a deluge of snow and wind almost swept me from my feet, and it was with the greatest difficulty that I succeeded in forcing the door shut again. The fire had begun to die down and the room had grown chilly. No sooner had I piled on more fuel and stirred up the fire, than I realized that the oil in the lamps was nearly burned out. In a few minutes I should be in darkness, save for the light from the open stove door. Hastily hunting for the kerosene can, I was dismayed to find the oil exhausted. Moment by moment, I watched the flickering flame of the lamp. Finally, the light sputtered and went out.

The darkness that suddenly fell brought with it a realization that I was tired and sleepy. The teacher's desk was too short for comfort as a bed. The pupils' benches, however, were made of long planks, and here I knew I could stretch out; so, filling up the stove with soft coal, and using my fur hat for a pillow, I lay down and tried to sleep.

The unusual surroundings and the hardness of my resting-place did not permit uninterrupted slumber. I fell into a doze, only to awaken with a start. Again and again I tried to sleep. But always I awoke within a few moments. At such times, I heaped more coal upon the fire. It seemed as if morning never would come.

When, at last, day dawned, the moisture from within the room had frozen upon the window-panes, so that I could not see out. Opening the door, I found snow still falling and the blizzard raging. Although I caught an occasional glimpse of the sun through the flying clouds, I knew the storm had not abated. I was faint from hunger.

I washed my face in snow and, melting more of the freshly fallen flakes, I drank and drank of the icy-cold water.

It was very evident that no living being could make headway against the blizzard that was raging, and I knew that I was penned in for all day. I wound the clock. I paced the aisles between the crude wooden benches. I counted the cracks in the flooring, the panes in the windows. I resorted to every device I could think of to while away the tedium that hung over me with a deadening monotony. Every hour seemed a full day; the minutes and seconds hung back with cruel willfulness, until I was tempted to brave the elements rather than to endure longer the loneliness of the schoolroom.

At last, noon came. Again, in a few hours that seemed interminable, darkness fell. The supply of coal, I knew, would not take me through the night, and although there was more in the barn, to venture so far as that from the schoolhouse would be foolhardy. I fed the last shovelful of coal to the ravenous stove before eight o'clock. I knew there would be little sleep for me that night, as the room soon would be too cold for comfort; so I determined to get what sleep I could before the room lost its warmth. About ten o'clock I awoke, shivering from the cold. How I got through that night I do not know, except that I walked the floor until exhausted by the long, weary vigil.

With the first streak of dawn, I made up my mind I would brave the elements rather than stay in the deserted schoolroom any longer. The second morning showed a slight abatement of the storm, but I knew it would still be a risk to venture out of doors. Determined to try it, I bundled up in my buffalo coat and hat and opened the door. A gust of wind nearly took me off my feet, while the cutting cold bade me beware of exposing my face or hands.

Inwardly breathing a prayer for protection and guidance, I pushed myself through the drifts, turned the corner of the schoolhouse, and struck out in a northwesterly direction on what I took to be the road to Frayden's Folly.

I had gone only a few rods, however, before schoolhouse and barn disappeared from my view. In which direction they lay, I could not determine. As the snow struck my warm face, it melted and then, freezing, glued my eyelids together with an icy seal. The cold was intense. I could not face it for more than a minute or two at a time. The snow seemed to be coming from every direction. It blew up from around my feet. It came down upon my head in showers. In gusts it struck me in the back, while at the same time the northwest wind drove it into my face with a force that I could not withstand. I could not see my hand held a foot in front of my eyes. On and on I stumbled. How long I walked, or in what direction, I never knew. Faint from lack of food and weak for the need of sleep, I was no match for the fury of the storm, and when finally I stumbled and fell into a drift, I was too exhausted to struggle to my feet again.

It was so nice and warm in the drift into which I had fallen and I felt so drowsy, that I let myself go. I remember breathing a prayer. Disjointed portions of Scripture flashed through my mind. "'I will look up unto the hills from whence cometh my help, — I will lay me down in perfect peace; — I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; — yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow —.'" And then, the pleasantest of sensations took possession of me; dreams ineffable crowded and filled my numbing brain. I was just about to slip into oblivion, when I felt something warm and moist upon my cheek. I imagined Shep was licking my face; and then a sound penetrated my consciousness, as a hand reached down into the drift and pulled me to my feet with great force.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE OLD SCOUT SAVES MY LIFE

At the time, I sensed little of what was going on about me; later, I learned that it was Manfred's courage that had saved me from freezing to death. The old scout had been caught in the blizzard and had been compelled to seek shelter at Frayden's Folly.

As the storm had increased in violence, mother and Aunt Mary became greatly alarmed at my continued absence, although my stepfather made light of their fears. Struggle as they would to compose themselves, when darkness fell the two women gave up all pretense of assurance. Bitterly they berated Alexander Frayden for compelling me to walk to school when there were horses standing idle in the barn.

It was dark when Manfred stumbled through the drifts and pounded upon the back door. He knew nothing of my absence or he would have been more careful of his words in the presence of the panic-stricken women who offered him shelter.

"Nigh onto th' worstest blizzard I've ever saw!" he exclaimed, after he had returned from the barn, where

"Shep lifted his head and howled dismally."

he had sheltered his horse. "If yer hadn't had that air rope strung from th' barn to th' house, I'd never got back. Little hope fur any one out in sech a storm. It'll be worser, too, 'fore mornin'," he said.

With a groan, Aunt Mary fell back into a rocking-chair and, throwing her apron over her head, sobbed aloud. Mother, pale from fright, gripped hard on the chair behind which she was standing.

Shep, an interested spectator, lifted his head and howled dismally.

"Why — what's th' matter?" Manfred asked, puzzled at their strange behavior. Suddenly noting my absence and suspecting the cause of their actions, he turned to my stepfather and hoarsely whispered, "Where's Don?"

"Hasn't returned from school," my stepfather replied laconically.

"How'd he go, horseback or team?" Manfred questioned.

"Walked!" almost shouted Aunt Mary, as she uncovered her tear-stained face and jumped to her feet. "Walked! Walked!" she continued hysterically. "With horses in the barn, that brute's made the poor child walk through snow and slush and wind and rain, nearly eight miles a day," she said, pointing at my stepfather, who, fully conscious of the situation, stood before them abashed. "The poor child has had to get up at five o'clock to do the chores; then, after he's walked eight miles and studied hard all day, he must come home and do more chores; while — while that man sits round all day reading the papers."

"I never made him walk to school," my stepfather indignantly countered.

"No! You didn't compel him to walk! You tried to compel him to stay away from school. You told him he would either have to walk to school or stay at home, you coward!" Aunt Mary replied, stamping her foot upon the floor, as if to emphasize her words.

"Th' devil yer say!" exclaimed Manfred. "Yer don't mean ter say yer wouldn't let th' kid ride a bronch ter school, Frayden, does yer?"

"We won't discuss it, Manfred. I'll manage my family without suggestions from outsiders," answered my stepfather.

"Ther — pardon me, ma'am, but this here's not merely a fambly 'fair; it's murder, that's what 'tis, if yer wants th' likes of me ter tell yer!" exclaimed Manfred. "If anything happens ter that kid, well, yer better seek a warmer climate, Frayden; that's all I've got ter say."

My stepfather was not a little disturbed at this aspect of the situation. His self-possession left him, as always is the case with braggarts and blusterers when real trouble comes.

"What can we do? You can't see your hand before your face outdoors," he rejoined weakly.

"There's nothin' any one kin do, 'cept ter wait an' hope fur th' best," answered Manfred. "Poor little kid," he added, in an undertone, "smart as er whip!"

Shep must have sensed my danger, for he ran continually from door to door and window to window. He barked and scratched at the doors; he stood on his hind legs and tried to see through the frosted window-panes; every once in a while, he would cock his head from side to side and seem to be listening for sounds too subtle for human ears to detect. He would not eat. Tired with the weary vigil of pacing back and forth, he varied the monotony by standing in the middle of the floor and howling dolefully. All efforts to quiet him seemed futile.

"Seemed like th' critter knowed yer were in danger, sonny," Manfred later said to me. "I tried to still him, but couldn't do a blamed thing with him."

The dog's anxiety certainly did nothing to lessen Aunt Mary's fears.

"Isn't there anything we can do, Mister Manfred?" my mother questioned.

"Must we all sit here doing nothing, while the boy's freezing to death on the prairies?" said Aunt Mary.

"My dear ma'am," replied Manfred, "I'd willin'ly risk my life, if it would do any good. Lan' knows 't ain't worth a shuck an' 'I ain't got long to stay here,' as th' colored folks ust ter sing, but I might's well shoot myself right here as ter chance it outdoors. If I knowed jest where he was at, I'd go an' glad of it, but — well, ma'am, it's useless," he concluded, dropping his long arms to his sides in helplessness.

They all realized the truth of his statement. All that could be done was to wait — the hardest of all tasks. No one could touch a morsel of food. As the gale whistled around the house, fairly driving the snow through the nail-holes of the shell so well named Frayden's Folly, fear gave place to utter dejection. Even the necessity of feeding the stove and the constant effort to adjust and readjust the blankets in which they were compelled to wrap themselves in order to keep warm could not take their minds from the calamity that seemed to have fallen upon them.

The house shivered and rocked under the force of the gale. It was impossible to keep warm, but they were reluctant to seek what comfort the thickly blanketed beds might afford.

"Brother Manfred," my mother said, breaking the silence that, for a moment, had fallen upon the little group huddled about the base-burner, "I don't know what you believe, or what church you belong to, but I am sure you could not have lived alone with Nature out on these plains for many years without gaining some kind of faith in a Supreme Being."

"I don't know as I reckon I jest perzactly onderstands what yer mean, Missus Frayden, but if yer wants ter know if I believes in a God, I'll say as I does; an' He's a mighty good One at that. I ain't got much time for human natchur. I've lots more respeck for a good animal, but I know there's a some kind of er Some One that's made us all, an' I knows He's willinger to make 'scuses for us than we air for makin' of them for each other."

"Then, if you don't mind, Brother Manfred, so long as we ourselves can do nothing for Don, you won't mind, will you, if we ask Him to look after the boy?" said mother.

"Bless yer heart, ma'am, if yer want us ter pray, we'll do it. That's th' only thing there is ter do for him," Manfred answered.

My stepfather had usually been the one who conducted family prayers, but there had been so many times of late when his mood caused him to refuse this duty, that it had become quite customary for mother to take his place. This night my mother must have had more faith in her own petitions than in his, for she seemed anxious to assume charge of the evening's devotions.

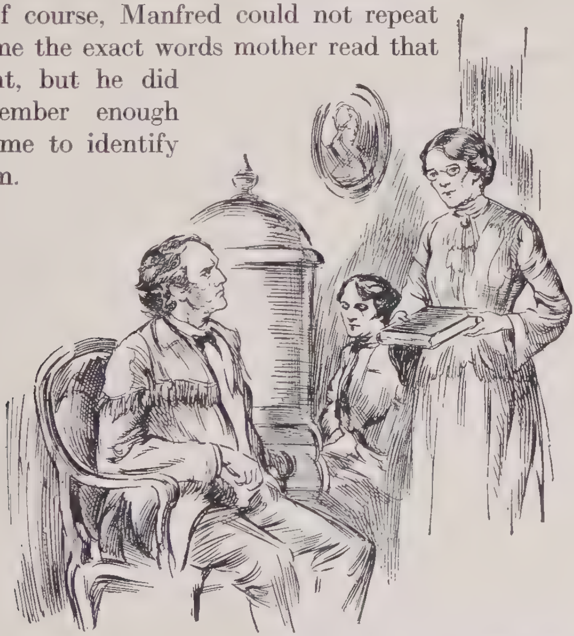
Drawing away from the stove, she sat down beside the marble-covered walnut center table. Turning up the wick of the lamp, she tried to adjust the flame, which was blowing and sputtering in the current of air that swept through the room from the nail-holes and cracks in the siding of the poorly constructed house.

"We will read a word or two from the Psalms," she said, as she adjusted her glasses, opened the big family Bible, and turned its pages.

How well I can see the picture Manfred drew for me in his crude way!

"There we was," he said, "yer Aunt Mary all huddled up ter th' stove, wipin' her eyes; yer stepfather on t'other side of th' stove, his feet on th' fender, holdin' his head in his han's. Me sittin' between th' two, an' yer little gray-haired ma in th' center of th' room. Her long, slim han's, I could see, wuz blue from th' cold. I could see how she pulled her han's away when her fingers first touched th' cold pages of th' Bible. She threw a fur robe 'bout her shoulders an' begun ter read," he added.

Of course, Manfred could not repeat to me the exact words mother read that night, but he did remember enough for me to identify them.



"'We will read a word or two from the Psalms,' she said."

"'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord Who made Heaven and earth,'" read my mother. Then, turning the pages, she picked out, here and there, some of the words of assurance with which the Psalmist had comforted himself. On and on she read, shivering from the cold, her teeth at times chattering so that she hardly could pronounce the words that fell from her lips. "'. . . Thou shalt not be afraid of — of the terror by night,'" she faltered, her voice breaking. "'. . . There shall no evil befall thee . . . for He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways . . . He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him,'" read my mother, her voice growing stronger and stronger, as the comforting words of the Psalmist gave her new courage.

"God bless my soul, Don," Manfred later said to me, "I never hankered after religion, an' I s'pose folks has thought me an ol' codger of a sinner, but it's not what t'other folks thinks of yer, but what yer thinks yerself, that counts. As I told yer ma, I always have had er wholesome respeck fur th' Almighty, an' I've tried to do as near right as I knowed; jest th' same, I've kilt Injuns an' them as was worse, but it was th' only thing ter do or git kilt myself. But when yer ma read outer th' Book, an' when she prayed for yer in the blizzard, somehow, I jest knowed th' Almighty already had answered th' prayer 'fore we got offen our knees.

"Jest think on it, Don, me a ol' codger, grizzled an' good for nothin', on his knees an' fur th' first time since I ust ter say, 'Now I lay me down ter sleep.'

"If ol' Frayden had th' kin' of religion yer mother's got, somethin' worth while would er happened in th' Blue Blanket Valley, 'fore this.

"Say, do yer know, I haven't heard th' Bible read in fifty years? I didn't know as how it was so sorta pretty like, an' kind er — oh, I don't know how ter say it — but it sorter made yer feel that, even if yer couldn't be on th' job yerself all th' time, He was right on th' spot ready ter help yer out.

"I liked that where she read as how I'll look up ter th' hills where help comes from. It seemed kinder funny, though, 'cause there's no hills here ter look up ter; but I guess it means th' same as though th' hills wuz here, 'stead of over on th' Missouri.

"Then, when she read 'bout bein' feared of th' night, an' a thousan' Injuns, no, I guess it was sojers, fallin' at yer side, but nothin' hittin' yer, an' how th' angels would take keer of yer, an' how He'd git yer message anyways an' come ter yer help — why — it all seemed like a yarn, an' yet somehow it sounded as if it would all come out that air way."

I could not possibly repeat the exact words of the hardened old scout nor could I begin to express the feeling he put into his words. I did not tell him that my mother had been reading my favorite Psalms; that I knew every verse of them by heart; and that, as I was stumbling through the blizzard, almost stiff from the cold, my limbs too tired to bear me much farther, I was repeating to myself the very words my mother had read to him. Neither did I tell him that, as I fell exhausted into the drift, almost the last words that came to me were these — "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." They were almost the last words that went through my mind before Manfred's strong arm dragged me through the snow and pulled my limp body across the back of his horse. Then I heard his voice, and a feeling of safety took possession of me as I lapsed into unconsciousness.

"I tell yer, boy, a faith sech as yer mother has is worth all th' gold I lost in th' Missouri through them pesky Redskins. As soon as she got through readin' of th' Scriptures, I seen she was a diff'runt woman; an' when she finished prayin', I knowed from th' light on her face she knowed her prayer'd ben answered. She didn't seem ter worry no more at all," Manfred said.

It was all that they could do to restrain the old man from starting out the next morning in search of me; on the second morning, they could no longer detain him. For a few moments, the storm seemed to be letting up. Mounting his horse, Manfred set out in the direction of the schoolhouse. As he left the house for the barn, Shep bounded out of the door with him and, when the old scout started on his way, the dog shot ahead. Fortunately, the wind was at their back, but even so the old scout's experience of years on the plains was all that saved him. At times, he said, he must have been a mile or more south of the road and again, the same distance too far north. His aim was to reach the schoolhouse; and it seemed only chance that caused his horse to shy from my body lying fully a mile and a half off the road.

I spoke of the "chance" of his finding me, as soon as I had recovered sufficiently to thank him, but he rebuked me for my choice of the word.

"No chance 'bout it, boy, an' yer not th' one as should call it chance, neither. Didn't yer mother read 'bout th' angels takin' keer of yer, an' as how yer shouldn't be afraid?"

I accepted the rebuke. "You are right, Manfred, there was no chance about it; not one in a million.

Blind chance never would have led any one to me through that storm."

"I thought I was a goner a dozen times," Manfred said. "If it hadn't ben fur Shep, prob'ly I never would 'a found yer. Guess it was th' Almighty that told th' dog where yer was at. I kep' wantin' ter turn ter th' right but Shep, he stopped an' barked every time an' when I got back inter what I thought was th' road, th' dog'd bark an' run off ter th' left; an' so I made up my mind ter foller him, an' darn my hide if he didn't lead me right to where yer was at!"

It was Shep's tongue, then, that I had felt licking my face as I was about to drop into unconsciousness in the drift.

Days passed before I fully recovered from my exposure. My face had been badly bitten by the intense cold and my limbs were seriously frozen. Here again, Manfred's experience stood me in good stead. My stepfather, now thoroughly alarmed, had insisted upon rubbing my limbs with snow, but they did not respond to this drastic treatment. From my toes to my knees, the skin had darkened. Much frightened, I heard my stepfather in the next room tell Manfred that gangrene probably had set in. I had no idea what "gangrene" meant, but I knew it must be something terrible.

"We must get the doctor at once! I am afraid he will lose both his limbs. Only an operation can save his life!" I heard Alexander Frayden say.

Trembling from fear, I sat up in bed, trying to hear more of the conversation and yet afraid of a confirmation from Manfred of my stepfather's opinion. Manfred's words, however, at once reassured me.

"If yer let that sawbones come up here from Center Town, I'll throw 'im out of th' window by th' heels!"

exclaimed the old scout. "If more people would use commun sense 'stead of runnin' for doctors, there'd be fewer undertakers. I'll show yer a trick th' Injuns learned me!"

I heard Manfred leave the house and go toward the barn. In half an hour, he returned with two heavily laden wheat sacks. Laying a horse blanket on the floor, he tenderly lifted me out of bed and laid me on the blanket.

"Yer kin shut yer eyes an' yer kin hold yer nose all yer wants to," he laughingly said, as he tenderly lifted one of my blackened legs and thrust it into one of the sacks, which he tied about my knee. Nauseated, I made a feeble protest, but the old man speedily shamed me.

"Thank th' good God, boy, that He gave more sense to th' Redskins than to some doctors. There's more filth on th' tongues of th' gossips, an' many wimmin as calls theirselves 'ladies,' than there is in that air sack. Now for th' t'other one!" he rallied. "Don't be a quitter, boy! Many a time I seed th' Injuns play this game!"

Hour after hour the old man stayed with me, changing the sacks every hour. Toward morning, the circulation began to creep back into my numb limbs, stinging me as it were with a million needles. The pain was almost unbearable; but Manfred washed my limbs and massaged them tenderly, while with his good-natured raillery he supported my powers of endurance. In time, the circulation became normal. My escape had been a narrow one, and had it not been for Manfred's knowledge and faithfulness, my stepfather's predictions would have been fulfilled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

FACING THE FUTURE

As soon as the blizzard was over, school was resumed. However, word reached the schoolhouse that I had been lost in the storm, and there was no attempt made to keep order that morning.

At noon, the teacher dismissed the pupils, and before night most of the settlers had heard that, because my stepfather had denied me the use of a horse, I had been compelled to walk to school and thus had been caught in the blizzard and frozen to death.

That same night, several of the settlers, angered by the story, drove over to Frayden's Folly. They were determined to have an accounting with my stepfather, but when they learned that I was very much alive, their wrath died down. However, they did not leave without telling Alexander Frayden a few of the opinions entertained of him by most of the settlers.

Jameson, who led the party, demanded that my stepfather accompany them to the barn. "We've got something to say to you, Frayden, and we don't care to have the women folks hear it," he said.

Reluctantly and somewhat fearfully, he obeyed. It was Jameson who later told me of this interview.

"We don't like the way you do things, Frayden," he said, as soon as they reached the barn, "and we don't propose to put up with it any longer."

"What do you mean?" my stepfather demanded with a show of indignation.

"You ban too darn fresh, I tank," spoke up Ole Olsen.

"Ya, you tread dot leetle kid like he was a — a pig," said Hans Dreblow.

"I'll manage my family to suit myself, and you can do the same with yours," retorted my stepfather.

"We won't discuss that, Frayden," Jameson interposed. "You've treated the boy shamefully and it's not your fault you are not his murderer. And to think that he saved your life!"

"Saved my life?"

"Yes, saved your life!" replied Jameson. "If the boy hadn't let you down the well that day and fooled us as he did, there's no telling what would have happened. It was a plucky thing to do and now I am glad he did it."

"Yas, that ban so," Olsen agreed, shaking his fist angrily. "You ban an' set dat fire, yas? Yule, mine woomans, says she bet dat red haid of er Frayden ban an' did it to get evens mit Horton!"

"What is it you want with me? I don't care to carry on this discussion any further," my stepfather protested.

"We expect you to treat that boy better, for one thing," Jameson answered. "They say you don't treat the missus over kind, either. If we hear any more such tales, we'll run you out of the country. Do you understand?"

"Yas, an' I tank you will oxcuse yerself from th' skul board," said Olsen.

"A good idea!" Jameson said. "We'll go into the house right now and draw up your resignation."

"And what if I refuse to sign it?"

"Well, it's about sixty miles to Blunt, the nearest railroad station. Don walked seven miles a day in going to school and back. We'll give you ten days to make it on foot; that's a mile a day less than you made the boy walk. You can have thirty minutes to pack your duds and five minutes to make up your mind what to do," Jameson concluded.

Without another word, Alexander Frayden beckoned the party to follow him as he turned and walked toward the house. Showing them into the dining room, he sat down at the table, commanding my mother to bring him pen, ink, and paper. In a few minutes he had drawn up his resignation as a member of the school board, signed it, and handed it to Jameson.

"I trust this gives you as much pleasure as it does me," he said, as he bowed mockingly to Jameson.

"Vare vas dot Holy Geist Jones feller?" questioned Dreblow.

"Brother Jones is staying with Samuel Rounds," answered my stepfather.

"We'll just drive over there and get both of their signatures to this paper," Jameson announced. "And don't forget we mean every word we've said to you, Frayden," he warned, as he led the party out of the house and mounted his horse. "Your missus is a real lady, and if it wasn't that we don't like to worry her, you wouldn't get off so easy."

Soon the little party was headed in the direction of Rounds' ranch. Later, I learned through Violet that they had forced her father and Parson Jones to sign their resignations as members of the school board.

His callers gone, my stepfather, with his face and eyes aflame, presented a veritable picture of rage. He gripped the first chair he came to, as if to steady himself. The blaze in his cheeks turned to a ghastly white as his features moved convulsively. I thought he was about to be seized with some kind of paroxysm. The pallor of his face soon became livid and, with dilated nostrils and eyes fixed, he lifted the chair above his head and dashed it with all his force to the floor.

So intense was his anger that dumbness took the place of speech. Aunt Mary, trembling with fright, ran upstairs; mother locked herself in her room; while I, flat upon the floor above, shivered as I peered through the cracks at the man below.

And now began days of terror such as we had experienced during our first year upon the farm. We had thought that my mother's recent illness had worked a change in my stepfather; but now we knew we had been enjoying only a temporary respite.

Thanks to Manfred, I soon was all right again, and once more found myself continuing my long walk to and from school; for my stepfather, relentless and determined as ever, had not been intimidated by the threats of the settlers. In fact, their visit had made him more tyrannical than ever.

It was the middle of March. Spring was late. The winter had been unusually severe, even for the Dakotas. The snow on the level lay fully three feet deep, while in the ravines and gullies the drifts were dangerous for any traveler who might stray from the main roads. The well-beaten paths were sure for the horses' hoofs, but a swerve to the right or left might mean a plunge through the snowy crust that would bring certain disaster to a heavily laden sledge.

Reports came from Blunt that no trains had arrived from the East for thirty days. In fact, it was said that along the railroad cuts the snow had drifted as high as the tops of the telegraph poles. About the middle of the month, another Chinook wind came and melted much of the snow, filling the sloughs with water and uncovering the blackened plowed fields that awaited the spring planting. Much as I dreaded the cold and the blizzards of winter, this thaw brought me far more discomfort, as I had many sloughs to cross on my way to school. In places, the snow lay lightly over an underflow of water, and I was compelled to wade through this, sometimes wet to my knees. After my first experience of this kind, I took with me to school an extra pair of boots and socks, changing, when I reached the schoolhouse, from my sodden woolen boots to a dry pair.

In the winter-time, all the settlers wore high woolen boots that reached to the knees; over these boots they wore rubber arctics. Without the arctics, the boots were no protection against water; but had it not been for the woolen boots, the farmers would have frozen their feet many a time, as ordinary shoes were worthless as a protection against the cold.

Aunt Mary's protest that I would "catch my death of cold," had little weight with my stepfather, who seemed to take delight in my discomfiture.

"He ought to know enough to stay at home," was his surly response.

Time and again mother begged that I be permitted to ride a horse to school, but without avail. Fortunately for me, zero weather soon caused the sloughs to become frozen over.

It was so cold at Frayden's Folly that, during the daytime, one could not keep warm. Forced to care for the stock, we reluctantly left our beds, the women folks to prepare breakfast, while my stepfather condescended to help with the work about the barn.

After breakfast, when I had left for school, the women again sought their beds in order to keep warm, and there, under buffalo robes, they slept the day away, rising only to replenish the hay-burner or to coax a few half-burned sifted coals into adding their mite toward heating the barn-like rooms. This was not an unusual experience, however, for a Dakota family living in a frame house, during those earlier days. Fuel was scarce and too precious to use up when there was nothing to do except read, so quilts and comforters and buffalo robes took the place of artificial heat during the long, weary winter days that threatened never to come to an end.

Upon my return to school, I found myself something of a hero in the eyes of my comrades. Even Zeke Rounds seemed somewhat awed by my near introduction to death.

"It wasn't a windmill this time, was it, Don?" Maud Warren said to me the first day of my return to school.

"No, it was the real thing this time," I replied.

"It was the real thing before, Don."

"Please —" I tried to interpose.

"We're all proud of you, Don, and you shouldn't prevent us from saying so."

A few days after this conversation, as we were on our way home after school, Violet Rounds remarked, "Do you know we only have two weeks more of school?"

"Why, it doesn't seem possible," I replied, almost overwhelmed by the prospect.

With the spring would come plowing, dragging, and seeding, besides an endless round of duties connected with other work on the farm. There was no one to do this work but my stepfather and me, and from experience I knew that his coöperation meant shifting the greater part of the load to my young shoulders.

I was young, but I was growing like a mushroom. My muscles had hardened, and the pale-faced city boy who had been sheltered behind the walls of the Castle in the far East, bade fair to develop into a man of no mean strength. I could lift a hundred-and-twenty-pound sack of wheat from the ground to my shoulders and walk off with it. Hour after hour, I had loaded such sacks of grain on the wagon, carrying them from the threshing machine to the waiting teams. I was not afraid of work. But to face forty, sixty, and eighty-acre tracts of land that awaited the plow, the drag, and the seeder was enough to dismay the heart of any boy. I knew we could not afford a hired man. How gladly I would have tackled the task, had there been any incentive to do so! So far, however, there had been no plan I ever had made for the development of the farm that my stepfather had not blocked. The prospect of the coming spring was not alluring to an ambitious boy.

A household that was not a home; a place ruled over by an absolute monarch, who kept every member of the family in abject fear; a place where each one went about in silence, afraid to utter a word lest an argument be started or a quarrel engendered; a home with a mother bereft of all but one of her children and that mother almost constantly in tears; a frightened, nervous little woman in the person of an aunt, darting in and out of doors, upstairs and then down again, in a constant effort to avoid the presence of this man who claimed sanctification; all this was not conducive to happiness. A big barn of a house into which drifted the winter snows and through which beat the summer rains, such was the environment in which I lived, a sensitive, imaginative boy who craved love and sympathy and who needed the kindly guidance of a real father.

From such surroundings I longed to escape. I had an ambition to make something of myself; what, I hardly knew. My intensive religious training, despite the hypocrisy of my stepfather, inclined me toward the ministry and so, with a desire to educate myself and to find a place in the world, I determined to run away from home.

I did not come to my decision to go, however, without first seeking the advice of Reverend Miles. I told him of my ambitions and of the difficulties with which I was confronted. His advice agreed with my own ideas. Still somewhat undecided, I then unbosomed myself to Henry Bacon, the schoolmaster.

"It's the only thing to do, my lad," he counselled. "There is nothing to be gained for any one by your staying. You need contact with the world. By all means go, and God be with you," he added.

Despite the hardships and the discouragements that we, as well as other settlers, had experienced, and in spite of the gloom and fear that hung over Frayden's Folly, there were associations I hated to break; there were friends I had made from whom I dreaded to part. Manfred was one of them, and his advice, too, I intended to ask.

Having finished the chores one Saturday morning, I mounted my pony and rode over to Manfred's dugout.

"Manfred, I'm going to run away from home," I startled him by saying, as soon as I had greeted him.

"God bless my soul, boy, don't creep up on me with yer news like an Injun tryin' to scare me to death 'fore he tomahawks me," the old scout ejaculated. "What's it all mean, sonny?"

I told him, as briefly as I could, of the reasons that had led me to the decision I had just announced.

"Best thing yer kin do, lad! I likes yer spunk! Hardly thought yer had it in yer, though. Yer so kinder shy like. Yer don't say much, but I always notice yer thinkin', thinkin'. Sometimes I ust ter wonder what it was yer was thinkin' of. Hate to lose yer, sonny. Yer kinder got a hold of me. Be turrible lonesome without yer, but it's best for yer, I guess. Git out in th' world an' knock 'em down, right an' left! Not peepul, but circumstances an' things. You'll make good!"

"Say, Manfred, do you remember the first time you met me?" I questioned, suddenly reminded that I never had told the old man how, unwittingly, he had terrified me that dreadful night when he was thrust upon me as an uninvited bedfellow.

"Sure, I does; yer wuz ridin' on a load of hay with Red Top, yer stepbrother," he replied.

"No," I chuckled in reply. "It was when you were a road agent, a brigand."

"Road agent! Brigand!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Have yer lost yer senses?"

"Yes, and you couldn't make up your mind whether to stick a knife in my back, or to carry me off to your band in the hills and hold me for ransom," I replied, doing my best to repress a smile at the old man's concern for my sanity.

"Maybe, yer better stay on awhile at Frayden's Folly arter all," he suddenly ventured. "It'll be better trav'lin' in 'nother month. Come on, I'll drive back with yer," he added coaxingly, now thoroughly afraid that my venture had been preying upon my mind and anxious to change me from my purpose.

Unable to contain myself, I burst into laughter, which only puzzled him the more.

"Why, yes, Manfred," I said. "Don't you remember the little pale-faced fellow from the city who was afraid of his own shadow? Can't you see him tucked in bed with the quilt nearly over his head? The door of his bedroom opened and a great giant of a man came in, struck a match, and lit the lamp. He had only one eye and a big gash on his cheek. He thought I was asleep, but I watched him take off his belt and lay his gun on the washstand, and then, when he got into bed with me, I trembled all night for fear he would kill me. The first thing in the morning, I crept out of the bed, dressed, and ran downstairs, and I never saw the outlaw again until one day James and I were riding home on a load of hay. I thought sure he would know me and shoot me on the spot!"

"You mean th' Buffalo House? You little sneezer! You don't mean to say that was you! Gosh-all-fish-hooks! I thought I never seed a kid so quiet afore — never moved a muscle all night! 'Fraid of ol' Manfred, were yer? Come to think on it though, guess a little city feller would be scairt of an ol' scarecrow like me a-comin' inter his room arter dark and crawlin' inter bed with him." The old man broke into a hearty laugh.

The few minutes I had to spare with Manfred sped altogether too swiftly. Of all the friends I had made in the Blue Blanket Valley, none had gripped me as had this leather-faced, hardened old scout. I felt that the old man had a real affection for me, and I was not mistaken.

"Say, sonny," he said hesitatingly, as I was about to leave him, "yer wouldn't think it funny if I ast yer ter do somethin' for me, now, would yer?"

"Why, of course not, Manfred; but what can I do for you?" I asked, in amazement.

"Yer knows as I ain't much on this religion stuff, but — but yer ma sorter got me to thinkin' an' — well, I kinder got sot on th' things she read in th' Book that night, an' — an' I was wonderin' if I gives yer th' money, will yer send me one of 'em, when yer gits ter town?"

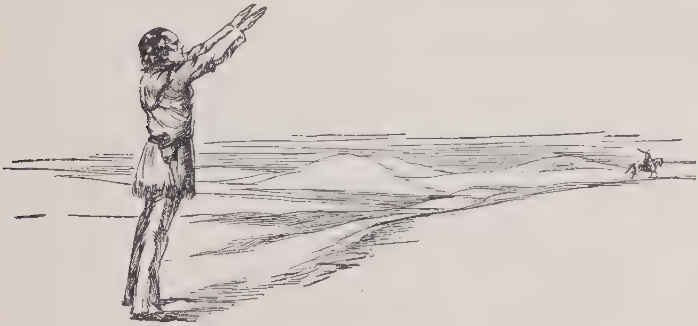
"Send you a Bible, Manfred?" I asked in surprise.

"That's it! Nothin' to be 'shamed on, is it? Course, I knows I'm gettin' old an' I ain't got much more time on these here plains, but I'm no sniv'lin' hypocrite! I falls where I stan's. I've always tried ter do my darndest but I 'low it's been mighty poor at times. I'm willin', howsomever, to take my med'cine. 'T ain't that, but I kinder thought as how it would help ter pass th' time ter read th' Book onct in awhile. I sorter likes it. It got a hold on me — list'nin' ter yer ma read it."

"Sure, I'll send you the best one I can find, Manfred," I replied. I kept my word, too. At the first opportunity, I sent him a large Bible with big type and steel engravings, marking therein the Psalm that had so touched him.

"Goodby, sonny, an' if yer gits inter trouble, don't forgit what yer ma read 'bout lookin' up ter th' hills!" Manfred said, as the time came for me to leave. I gripped him by the hand and turned away my face.

Jumping my pony, I turned, reluctantly, toward home, occasionally looking backward and waving at the old weather-beaten Indian fighter, standing sentinel-like, almost as immovable as a statue. As long as I could see, he had not changed his position, but, with one foot forward, his hands raised above his head and inclined toward me, he gave me the Indian's farewell.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

FAREWELL TO FRAYDEN'S FOLLY

I COULD not mention my plans to Maud, but almost before I knew it I was telling Violet of my determination to leave home.

"Why, Don?" she questioned in surprise. "You can't do it — you don't really mean it, do you?"

"Of course I do!"

"But how are you going to manage it? You're not of age and your stepfather won't let you go."

"That's what puzzles me. If he should see me leaving with a bundle, he would be suspicious."

"Why not take one thing at a time? When you get ready for school, hide it under your overcoat. When we leave the schoolhouse at night, give it to me and I'll hide it in that deserted sod shack north of the schoolhouse."

"You're a brick, Vi!" I exclaimed.

"Maybe the schoolmaster will take the things home with him. Then, some Sunday, you can say you are going to see the teacher, and you can start out from his place. But where are you going?"

"Ipswich. That's the end of the road, you know."

"But how will you get to Ipswich?"

"Walk."

"Walk!" she exclaimed. "Seventy miles, with the snow three feet deep on the level and the mercury twenty below zero? Don, you're crazy!"

"It's only sixty miles. Anyway, most of the settlers go south to Blunt, and if I go this way it will throw my stepfather off the track."

"Don, you can't; you must not try it. You'll freeze to death! Think how near you came to being lost in the blizzard!"

"That's just what I don't want to think about. I've only three or four dollars and I must save that for railroad fare, so, you see, I can't hire any one to drive me to the railroad."

"I've got a little saved, Don. Won't you let me lend it to you?"

"You know I couldn't let you do that, Vi." I thought I saw mist in her eyes and I was almost touched to tears myself. "Thank you, just the same."

"Does Maud know you are going?" she asked, after a pause.

"No," I reluctantly replied.

"Why didn't you tell her?"

"Oh, I don't know. The fewer that know it the better; besides, what difference would it make to her?"

The girl did not reply. I changed the subject quickly, rather ashamed of myself for showing my feelings.

As I rode home that night, I could not dismiss Violet Rounds from my mind. I thought of the many happy days we had had together. Without her friendliness and confidence, life at Frayden's Folly would have been next to impossible. I would miss this friendship, I well knew, but there seemed no alternative. Perplexed by my emotions, I dismissed them as best I could when I neared home, and thought only of how my mother and Aunt Mary would take the possibility of my going.

"Think I'll slip out of here when spring comes, Aunt Mary," I said.

"What! Leave me all alone? Don, you don't mean it! You can't! You won't!"

I was so nonplussed by her consternation that I dared not say anything more about my plan, so I tried to turn it off as a joke. "Oh, you will go and live with brother William, anyway."

Mother's attitude rather perplexed me. "Donald," she said, "I shall not stand in your way. At times, I think I wish you would go, for your own sake; then again, the dread of losing you takes hold of me and I'm selfish enough to want to keep you. No one more than your mother realizes your need of a real father. If you think it's the thing to do, Don, all right. I know this has been no home for you, and I hate to see you fighting it out here alone with nothing to gain, just because you know we don't want to lose you, or because you feel it a duty to stay."

I did not think, at the time, that she really believed I was in earnest. Her words seemed intended merely as a stimulus to my ambition.

The last week of school, my stepfather seemed unusually impatient. The coming spring work worried him. How it was to be accomplished neither of us knew; and as I noted his anxiety, a feeling of being a deserter almost overwhelmed me.

"The seed wheat ought to be cleaned this week; we've got to find seed potatoes somewhere, and then we ought to go over all the machinery. The sulky plow needs a new moldboard. The harness ought to be oiled; besides, it needs sewing. I've got to get a new pair of hames for the horses, and I don't know what all there is to do before we'll be ready for the fields. We ought to be in shape just as soon as the ground is fit," recited my stepfather, one night, after I had returned from school.

I felt like a traitor, knowing as I did that with the closing of school I should be leaving Frayden's Folly.

Day after day, I had been smuggling out of the house a garment or some other article that I wished to take with me. As I left for school, it would be with a blouse under my buffalo coat, or with a pair of overalls or some socks in my capacious pockets.

Once my stepfather noticed the bulging appearance of my coat as I was leaving for school. "That boy must have a wonderful appetite, judging from the way his lunch fills out his coat," I heard him say to mother.

"I guess he has on an extra coat under his furs. It's frightfully cold facing the northwest wind on the way home," she replied.

On reaching the schoolhouse, I disgorged my various bundles and hid them in the barn. At night, I made it a point to help Violet Rounds with her pony and found it easy to transfer my packages to her without attracting attention. Faithfully she carried these bundles and left them in the old deserted sod shack. There they were safe, as no one was likely to visit the crumbling sod house, especially while the snow was deep on the prairies.

Steps were being taken by the proper officials to call for an election of new school trustees in the spring. Rounds blamed the situation upon my stepfather, and they had words which resulted in straining their former friendly relations.

"He's demanded that father pay what he owes him," Violet told me. "But father hasn't a dollar."

For some time Parson Jones had been dismayed by my stepfather's high-handed proceedings. More than once I overheard him remonstrating with my stepfather. I knew that for many months no contributions for the support of the evangelist had come from Frayden's Folly, but by this time I had also come to know that Parson Jones never had been influenced by such gifts. He may have been crude; he certainly had been strongly under my stepfather's influence; but that he was sincere could not be questioned. Perhaps he came to realize that his friendship for my stepfather had in part destroyed his own influence among the settlers. In any case, all the troublesome events of the past few months proved too much for him, and we were surprised one day to read in the *Pembroke Clarion* that he had sold his claim to Samuel Rounds and had left the country.

My stepfather was deeply hurt by this seeming desertion on the part of his friend. Jones had chosen wisely, however; he was as putty in the hands of my stepfather, and had he remained to discuss his plans, Alexander Frayden doubtless would have talked him out of them. Discouraged and heartsick, he had shaken the dust of the township from his shoes and had gone without so much as "God be with you."

"Rounds had better pay me what he owes, instead of buying a quarter-section of land!" my stepfather cried, as he threw down the paper announcing the purchase of Parson Jones's claim.

With his one real friend gone and with Samuel Rounds, his crony, estranged from him, my stepfather felt deserted. Life for him, too, had become intolerable. There was nothing any one could say at which he did not take offense. There was nothing we did that pleased him. At work in the barn with him one day, I heard him muttering to himself. Occasionally he would stop long enough to glare at me from eyes that showed strange glints which frightened me. It was but a passing mood, however, and in a few days gave place to dejection.

Many were the excuses that I tried to make for my stepfather. That his judgment was poor went without saying, but he was not the only one who, coming from the East, had attempted to put into practice methods suited only to other climatic conditions.

It was generosity, I reasoned, that caused him to be so free with his loans of my mother's money. Pride and the desire to cut a figure in the township of course were factors that made him an easy prey for borrowers; but was it not these very loans that had made it possible for many farmers to weather the financial stresses of this untried country, and did not some of these settlers later become prosperous as the result of such timely aid?

Again, as one pioneer expressed it, "Before we came out here, we literally pictured every blade of grass as a blade of gold; a fortune awaited the mere turning of the sod." It may have been with such wild hopes that Alexander Frayden brought us to the Territory. If so, to come to a realization of his unfitness to manage or direct an enterprise of which he had no first-hand knowledge must have been to him a bitter disappointment. To have all his plans fail; to experience the hardships of an unknown country; to see the failure of crops from drought and the ruin of grain from hail; — such disasters were enough to irritate, to discourage, and even to drive to desperation a man of Alexander Frayden's temperament. As I revolved these thoughts in my mind, boy though I was, I felt really sorry for the man who had treated us all so cruelly, and the idea of leaving him alone on the farm to face the doom of his hopes began to prey upon my mind.

The remembrance of all that we had suffered, however, and the necessity of planning for my future steeled my heart. What a life! I thought. What a contrast to the youthful days I had spent at the Castle! How vivid was my memory of the old walls covered with wistaria and roses and honeysuckle! How often I thought of the trees and the shrubbery and the grape arbors of the park that surrounded the quaint old structure! There was a certain wild beauty about the plains of the early Dakotas, but we missed the shade of the trees, the running brooks, and the cool, deep rivers to which we had been accustomed in the East.

The frenzy that Parson Jones and Samuel Rounds called "religion" did not dim my faith. Neither did the seemingly hypocritical actions of my stepfather change my deeply rooted confidence in the religion of service, so beautifully lived by Aunt Mary.

Friday came at last, and with it uncertain forebodings. The clock struck four and, at the last stroke, my days in the Blue Blanket Valley school ended. I bade goodby to Maud Warren as though nothing were about to take place. I simply could not tell her of my plans. Henry Bacon, the schoolmaster, agreed to ride on ahead and secure the bundle Violet had made of my few possessions and to take it home with him.

"I will take it with me, lad," he said, in a kindly voice. "Come over Sunday as early as you can. We'll be waiting for you."

"Goodby, Don, and God bless you," Violet said, as the last pupil disappeared down the road.

"I never can thank you enough, Vi."

"Don't try."

"Will you write to me?" I ventured.

"Certainly, if you would like to have me."

"Of course I would."

"Then I will; just as soon as you send me your address. Goodby, Don, till we meet again."

We both stood and looked down upon the snow which we desperately ground under our heels. An impulse, such as once before had beset me, prompted me to throw my arms about her but an equally strong counter-influence prevented me from doing it.

Suddenly, without a word, she jumped upon her pony and, almost before I could recover from my surprise, she was galloping down the snow-covered road. I stood and watched her. Again and again she turned, waving her scarf at me until she disappeared beyond the sky line.

It was my last walk home from school. I knew where every milestone lay hidden under the snow with one, two, or three scratches chiselled upon its surface to indicate the number of miles to the nearest section line. Nothing but a white plain lay stretched before me, but every bend in the road held associations that I would never forget. It was a heavy heart I carried, as I wended my way home to Frayden's Folly for the last time.

Sunday morning dawned clear but cold. The snow, which on the previous day had begun to melt, had frozen over again during the night, forming a hard, glassy crust that made the prairies resemble a sea of ice. The bright morning sun at times reflected all the colors of the rainbow on this mirror-like surface, causing it to scintillate and then change to a dazzling streak of white that blinded uncovered eyes.

Little black dots distributed over this white stretch of country marked the sod houses of the settlers. Thin columns of smoke from their stovepipe chimneys rose straight into the rarefied air like the signal fires of the departed Sioux whose wigwams had vanished to give place to the incoming tide of palefaces.

Such was the day I had selected for leaving home.

I piled the manger high with hay. I led the horses and cattle out to water, their breath rising in the frosty air like jets of steam. I gave the barn a thorough cleaning, and each horse I curried from mane to fetlock as I never had curried it before. I milked the cows and fed the pigs and the few chickens that were left. Then, satisfied that nothing had been neglected, I gave one last lingering look about the place, closed the barn door, and made my way to the house.

Solicitously I sought to aid in the work about the kitchen. Chopping the ice from the water barrel, I carried in pail after pail of water from the well. From what little fuel remained of the winter's supply, I brought in enough to serve immediate needs. I emptied the ashes from the base-burner in the living room, and in every possible way endeavored to aid Aunt Mary with her household work, for I knew this would be my last opportunity. Only by such incessant activity could I hide the excitement that burned within me.

Dinner time came. I shall never forget that meal. Since my stepfather's estrangement from his crony, Rounds, he seldom left the farm. With Preacher Jones gone, the services he had conducted had been discontinued, so that this Sunday morning was spent at home by my stepfather.

The last of the winter's meat, a roast of pork, was placed upon the table. With the few browned potatoes that went with it, it seemed a feast fit for a king. Butter and sugar were not in evidence; neither was there dessert of any kind; but we all were truly thankful for the meal, which surpassed in every way the usual fare.

Little was said at the table. We ate in silence, each one preoccupied with his own varied thoughts. Mine were so many and so complex that I could not have given them expression, had I tried. I ate each mouthful as slowly as I could. Reluctantly I pushed my chair from the table, and, as I did so, the thought came to me that I was pushing behind me the past with all its troubles and seeming tragedies, and with all its pleasures and joys.

"Guess I'll go over and see the teacher," I announced, as calmly as I could, pretending as I did so to look out of the window to ascertain the state of the weather.

"Better bundle up, Don," Aunt Mary said. "The thermometer is twenty below."

"Yes, and put on an extra pair of socks and your woolen boots," added mother. "The snow looks deep."

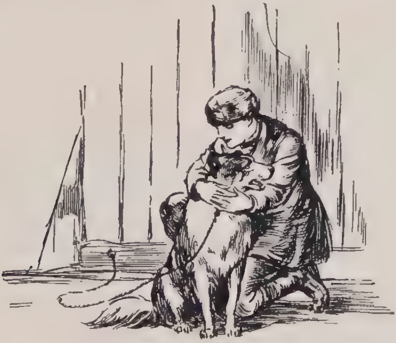
"Don't see what makes that boy so restless! Always on the go! Can't he stay home one day in the week?" exclaimed my stepfather irritably. "Won't you let that dog alone?" he snapped, turning towards me.

As I had been talking, Shep had been chewing on a strap, which I was trying to pull away from him.

"I'll take him to the barn," I answered. "Come, Shep."

I knew the dog would miss me when I left the house. More than once he had escaped and followed me to school. But I could not take him with me.

When I reached the barn, I tied him with a piece of rope to one of the stalls. The dog crouched at my feet



"'Shep, old boy,' I said, 'you know I can't take you with me.'"

with an injured look. It was the first time I ever had tied a rope about his neck. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" his eyes seemed to ask. "Has it ever before been necessary to tie me? Have I not always minded you? What have I done that I can no longer be trusted?"

"It isn't that, Shep, old boy," I said, as I knelt down and threw my arms about his neck. "I just must go, White Breast. You know I can't take you with me."

He licked the tears from my face as they fell and I knew he was trying to comfort me. "Don't you worry, old chap. I'll be a good dog. I know it's hard and I hate to have you leave me but —"

I cannot even now tell all that Shep said to me in that never-to-be-forgotten hour. We told each other many things in confidence, and a confidence should not be violated.

With a last hug, and with fingers in my ears to shut out the dog's reproachful howls, I ran to the house and left my most precious possession alone.

"Goodby, mother," I said, throwing my arms about her neck and kissing her, when I was ready to leave. It was all I could do to repress the sobs that choked me, but I knew I must not give evidence of my intentions and with a tremendous effort I managed to control myself.

"Why, you are only going to Bacon's," exclaimed mother. "One would think we never were to see you again, child. Goodby, and God bless you. Have a good time, but don't stay too late. It gets dark early, you know."

"I'm going, Aunt Mary," I announced as I entered the kitchen, where she was busily engaged in washing the dinner dishes.

"O Don, I'm afraid you'll freeze to death. Bundle up well. Oh, why did we ever come to this terrible country?"

"Goodby, Aunt Mary," I said again, as I caught her tight and pressed her close to me.

Striving to hide my tears and choke back my sobs, I closed the door upon Frayden's Folly and walked out into the snow and cold of a bitter Dakota day.

The four-mile walk to Henry Bacon's house was little of an effort for me. In less than an hour and a half, I was knocking at his door. I could hear, from within, the little cottage organ, accompanying a number of voices in the singing of a hymn; a customary Sunday afternoon pastime.

At my knock, the singing ceased and the door opened. "Come in, lad! Come in!" welcomed the kind-hearted teacher. "You are late."

In a moment, to my surprise, I was greeted by Violet Rounds and Maud Warren and brother William and his wife.

"I thought you would like to see them once more," explained the teacher.

I certainly was glad to see them again and did not hesitate to say so.

"Why didn't you tell me of your plans, Don?" Maud asked, at the first opportunity.

"I don't know. Thought you weren't interested, I guess," I replied reluctantly.

"What made you think that?" she inquired.

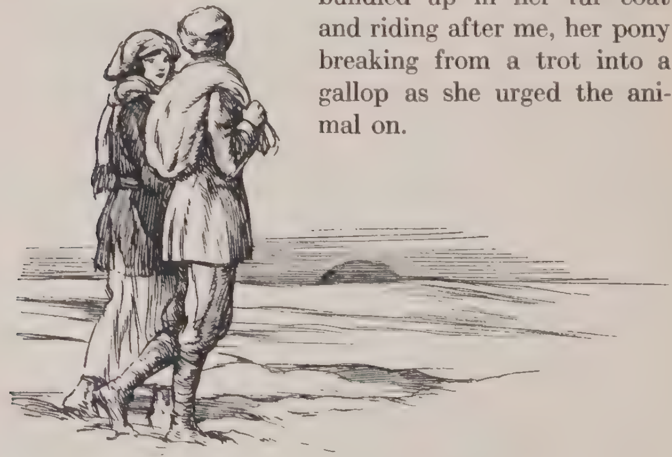
"Never saw any evidences of it," I answered.

"What evidence did you expect, Don? Haven't we always been good friends?"

Just then, William interrupted us and I was glad of the opportunity of concealing an embarrassment I could not explain. Brother William strongly urged me not to start out on so cold a night, pointing out the dangers that might confront me, but I was not to be shaken from my course. To turn back now would seem like cowardice. If I did not return to Frayden's Folly that night, my stepfather's suspicions would be aroused, and if I did return, I might not have another opportunity of leaving easily, and so I insisted upon having my own way.

My few possessions were stowed away in a wheat sack tied about the mouth with some binder-twine. Shouldering the sack, after bidding them all goodby, I started out. Slowly, I trudged down the road leading to the north. The sun, with its two mysterious angry red dogs, was just disappearing below the horizon. The deep purple sky rested heavily over the snow-white expanse of the prairies — all forming a picture I never have forgotten. Soon a dip in the road hid me from the house I had just left, and I felt strangely alone.

Suddenly I heard a hail. Turning, I saw Violet Rounds bundled up in her fur coat and riding after me, her pony breaking from a trot into a gallop as she urged the animal on.



"So we swung down the road together."

"Why, Vi, what's the matter?" I asked, as she caught up with me.

"Nothing!" she laughed nervously, as she jumped from her pony. "Told them I was going to ride as far as the end of the claim. Hated to see you go off alone."

So we swung down the road together, laughing and talking cheerily to hide our emotion, the pony following in our footsteps.

The end of the claim came all too soon.

"O Don, I hate to let you go. Think of it! The nearest town nearly seventy miles away and no telling when you will come to a house," she exclaimed, as we halted.

"Manfred told me there was a couple living fifteen miles to the northeast. I'll try and reach their place. Can make it by midnight, I guess. I'll try to stop there overnight," I answered.

"But — there are wolves on the prairies!"

"Only harmless coyotes," I replied.

"But you know the timber wolves come into Swan Lake bed. You have to cross that. And Manfred killed a wildcat near Beaver Dam, just this winter. You'll freeze to death before you reach a house. Give it up and come back, Don. Please, won't you, Don?"

"Can't, Vi; I've made up my mind that this is the only thing to do and there is no other way out of it."

"For my sake, Don? We've been such good pals, it won't seem like the same place when you are gone!" she pleaded.

"I must go, Vi; it's getting dark. Goodby, old pal," I said, taking her hand.

"Don!" she cried, and before I knew it, her arms were about my neck and I could feel her tears upon my cheek.

And then, she suddenly jerked away, jumped upon her pony, and fled down the road.

Helpless, I stood and watched her gallop away; and then, as once before, she stood on the brink of the horizon — at the end of the world, it seemed to me. Turning in my direction, she waved her scarf and then vanished into the purple twilight.

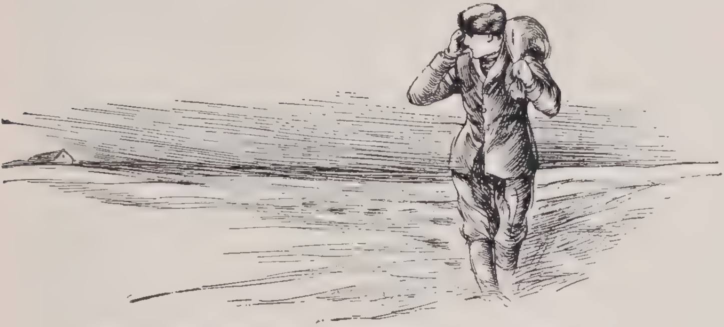
I stood for a moment in dismay, straining my eyes for another glimpse of the girl. Then a dark spot in the road suddenly took form and, with almost the speed of a greyhound, made towards me. Before I knew it, Shep was upon me, now pawing my clothes and jumping to lick my face; then turning and running in circles about me, barking as if demented with delight. Quieting the dog as best I could, I found that he had chewed apart the rope with which I had tied him. He must have got out of an open window in the barn, or else escaped when my stepfather went to care for the stock for the night.

"We've been partners for a long time, old chap," I said, as I untied the rope from the dog's neck. "It didn't seem fair to leave you behind, did it, old boy?"

Standing upon a little rise of ground, we could see the country for many miles around. Shep stood at attention, seeming to realize the gravity of the occasion and surveying, even as I, the prospect that lay before us.

The moon now held high court in the presence of a million stars and satellites. The Dipper hung low in the northern sky, pointing out the North Star, which was to guide me on my way. The light from the heavens sparkled upon the snowy crust that covered the prairies. Suddenly the Dipper paled from sight, as the sky broke out into a wonderful display of Northern Lights. "Surely, 'the Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork,'" I thought, as I remembered one of mother's favorite verses. I felt overcome with awe. Like a small speck lost in an immensity of space, I stood in silent contemplation of the scene before me.

"And now, Shep, you must go back," I suddenly said, awaking from my dreams. Hugging the dog to me once more, with my heart almost breaking at the thought of parting from him, I bade him go home. He looked at me questioningly, as if he had not heard aright; and then, with reproach in his eyes he turned, trotted a few steps, looked back, and then took to his heels, as if afraid I would scold him for disregarding my command.



"I still could see the dim outlines of Frayden's Folly."

Far to the east on its hill of arrogance, I still could see the dim outlines of Frayden's Folly and, a mile or two from me, coming out of a depression in the prairie, I could make out the figure of Violet on her pony, Shep far in the rear but gaining in pursuit. From Frayden's Folly I could see the twinkling of a light, evidently in the living room, where I knew my mother probably was reading her Bible, and I thought of the verse that had so impressed Manfred: "I will look up unto the hills from whence cometh my help."

Another light glowed from what I thought must be the kitchen. Here I knew Aunt Mary was busily engaged with the household tasks of the evening. I pictured myself seated at the dining-room table reading some favorite book. I dared not think of the dismay that would overtake them when they knew for a certainty that I had run away from home. I knew that when Aunt Mary came to turn down the blankets of my bed, as she did every night, she would find the note I had left pinned to my pillow.

With a sigh, I threw the sack containing my few possessions over my shoulder, and trudged down the road in the direction of Swan Creek and the mysterious lake bed I dreaded to cross. Here the rushes, perhaps, sheltered the wolves and wildcats which Violet, in her anxiety for my safety, feared.

As I toiled slowly through the deep snow that at times reached nearly to my waist, I watched the gathering clouds with their somber shadows creep across the plains. The purple of twilight long ago had given place to the gloom of night when the road, dipping before me, fast blotted out the last flicker of the rapidly fading light of Frayden's Folly.

The bitter cold of that winter night, the terror that grew as I struggled on through the drifts, the battle that I had with the wolves, need not be described in detail, vividly as I remember it all.

Over and over I found myself repeating, to gain courage, my mother's favorite Psalm: "Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror by night; there shall no evil befall thee; for he shall give his angels charge over thee." Many a time since have I been grateful to my mother for insisting that I store my mind with comforting words from the Scriptures.

I thought I never should find a habitation on that lonely way. It was long past midnight, indeed, before I finally did come upon a house, and a miserable frame shack it was; but I was glad enough to accept a surly invitation to take shelter for the night; glad enough to curl up in a buffalo robe on the cold floor of this shack.

Little need be said of the sixty-mile tramp across the plains to the nearest railroad station, a journey that faced me the next morning. At this little town I spent all but my last dollar for a ticket to a distant part of the Territory, where I hoped to find work on a farm.

At the end of my journey, I learned of a farmer who wanted to hire a man. It was raining hard, but I struck out for the job, as I had no money left for hotel expenses. Never shall I forget standing in the rain, soaked to the skin, at the door of this farmhouse.

"I heard you were looking for a man," I said.

"Why, yes. Know where I can find one?" asked the farmer.

"I'm looking for a job," I replied.

"You!" He broke into a loud laugh. "You don't think you're a man, do you?"

"I can do a man's work!" I exclaimed, hurt and indignant at his implied suggestion.

And I did do a man's work from that time on. I soon realized that I had left behind me at Frayden's Folly the shrinking, supersensitive boy I once had been. I earned money, too, — lots of it for a boy of my age.

An occasional letter from Violet kept me in touch with the happenings at home. She wrote that my stepfather had been advertising for me, even going so far as to offer a reward for my capture. At first I was alarmed at this interest in my welfare, but Violet soon assured me I was in no danger from his wrath.

The next news was startling. Frayden, himself, acknowledging defeat at last, had left the farm forever. Brought face to face with a foreclosure for debts, he had made a settlement by which he saved just enough from the wreckage he had made to take mother and himself into a nearby state. There, be it said to his credit, he entered the university, finished his study of medicine, and was graduated with honors.

Aunt Mary, after their leaving, went to live with my brother William. As for me, the way was now open to return whenever I would to my friends in the Blue Blanket Valley, and I did return — but not until after I had gone through a series of soul-stirring experiences in the rougher life of the Dakota plains. But that is another story, involving new issues which sprang out of the new life I deliberately had chosen when I cut the ties that held me to Frayden's Folly.

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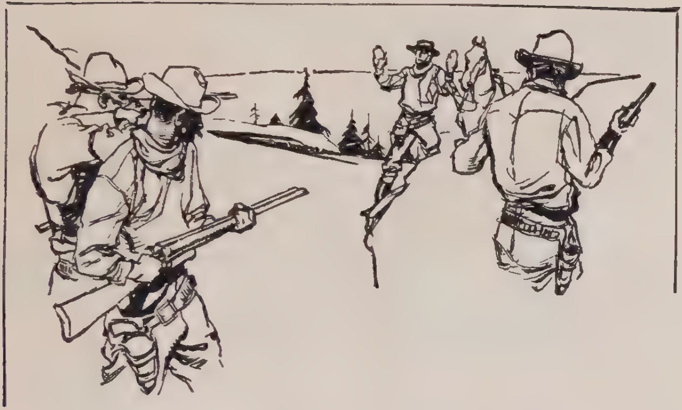

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